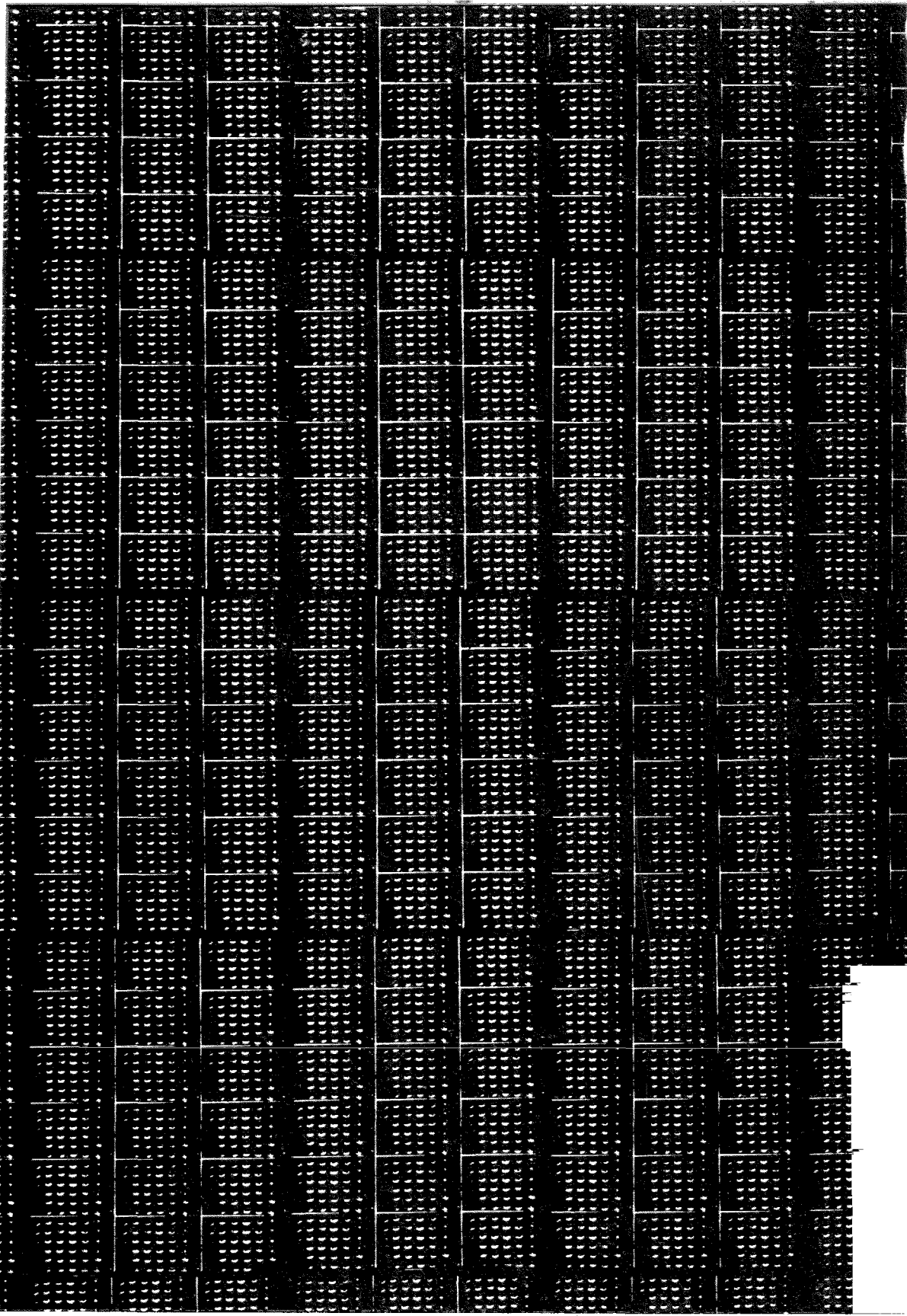
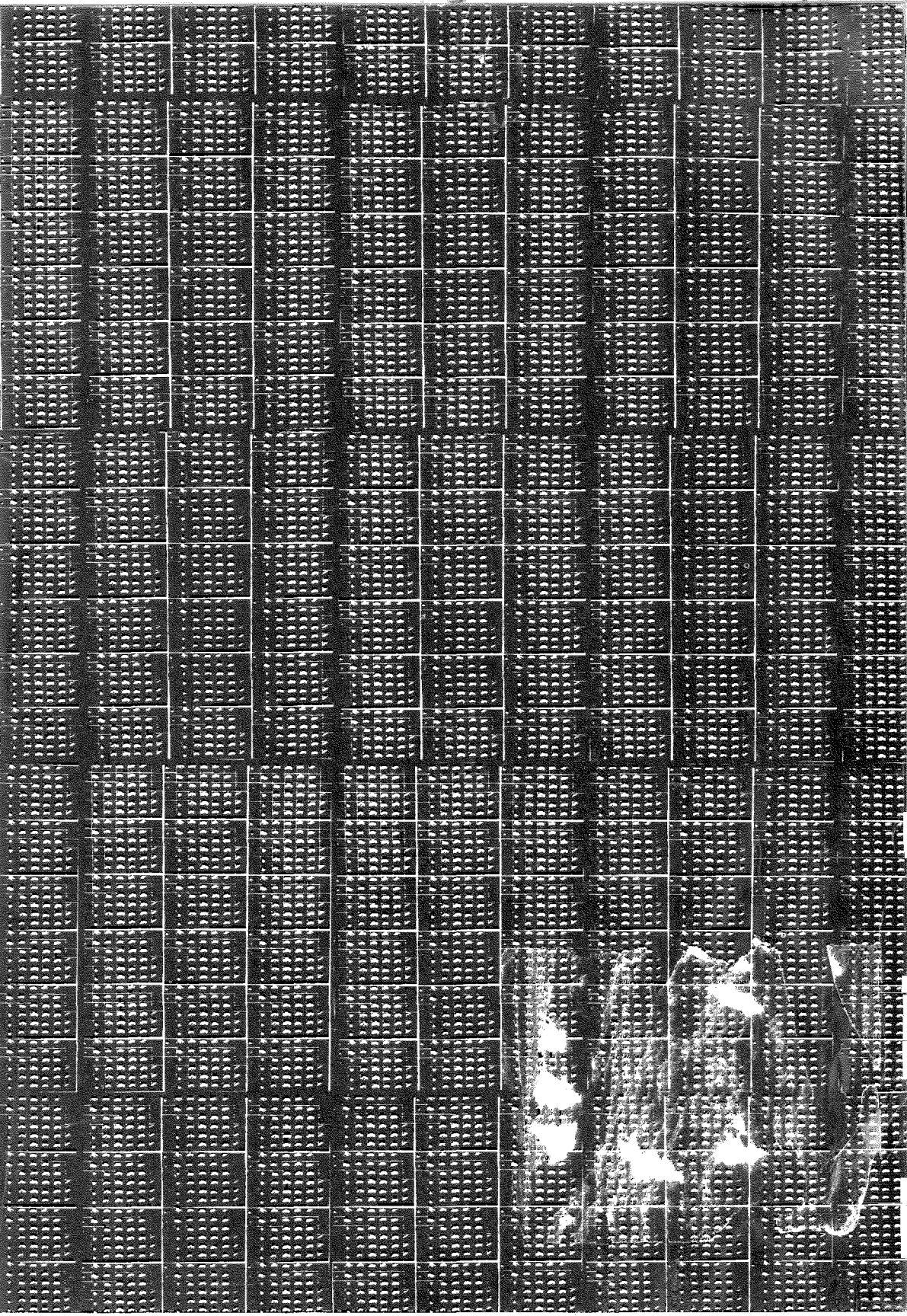


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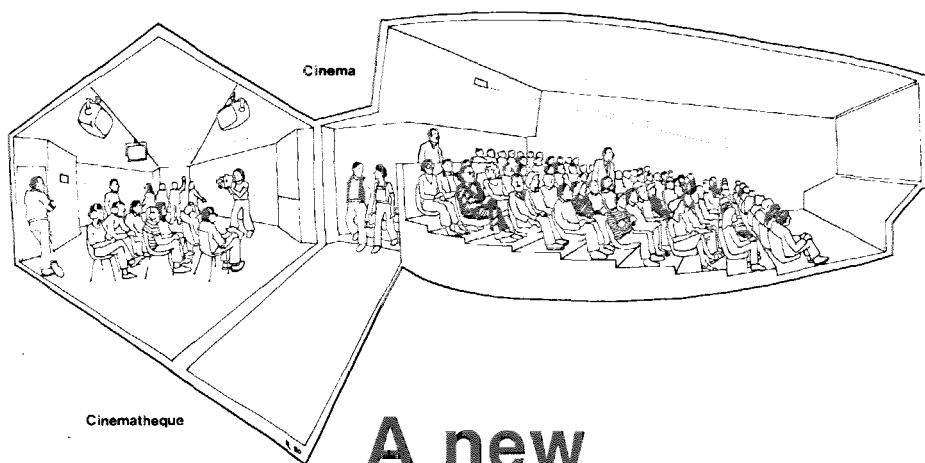


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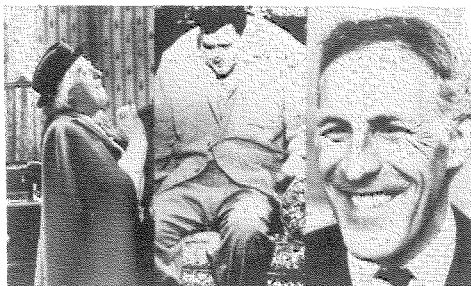
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M MACMILLAN
PRESS

The politics and form of television are urgent questions — especially when a fourth ('significantly different') television channel is being planned — yet they have been surprisingly resistant to analysis. Discussion in *Screen* (in particular the article by Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow 'Television—a World in Action', vol 18 no 2) has attempted to delineate the parameters of television's ideological operation: television seen as an extension of the cinematic apparatus, producing and reproducing the novelistic; a mode of providing and maintaining the terms of social intelligibility for the individual in which the individual becomes a *viewer*, 'the point of view of the sense of the programme' held into it, occupied and entertained. In this analysis, not only does television construct viewers, but the social is structured/restructured as television.

The problem then is how to change television (and also how to think of social and political change in an age of television). Organisations such as the Fourth Channel Group, Womens' Broadcasting and Film Lobby, the Independent Film-makers' Association, have addressed themselves mainly to questions of television's institutional structures. *Screen* has been concerned with the question of changing television representations. The notion of the 'progressive text' has been an important term in this discussion, 'progressiveness' being identified with such programmes as *Days of Hope* and *Law and Order* which confront areas of social and political con-

tradition (the continuing resonances of the General Strike, left and liberal concern about the agents of the law). Critical and political reservations about such programmes concentrated on the use of the realist form which, it was argued, did not confront the viewer with contradiction in such a way that they have to work to resolve them for themselves: such contradictions as were presented were already resolved by the programmes, and both contradictions and programmes were rapidly re-immersed within television's flow.

John Caughie takes issue with this position:

I want to be able to say that, for television, in its specific conditions, it may be politically progressive to confirm an identity (of sexuality or class) to recover repressed experience or history, to contest the dominant image with an alternative identity.

His article concentrates on the area of drama—specifically on documentary drama—arguing that the political importance of television drama cannot be thought only in terms of programme and audience, or in questions of form and content, but has to be thought also in terms of the places occupied by particular programme categories—in this case, drama—in the movement of relationships within the institutions. He, argues that within television two kinds of discourse—the 'official' and 'creative' are particularly unstable in relation to drama, the generally respected demands of creative freedom, social commitment, and controversial boldness on occasion coming into open conflict with the desire for cultural prestige and publicly acceptable standards. This opens an area the boundaries of which are relatively unfixed. Although he stresses the need for different ways of looking, he argues that, because of its instability, drama is one instance where it is and may well continue to be possible to produce representations which contribute to the political formation of a progressive audience. This points to the need to develop work on such representations, and on the possible areas which they might occupy within television.

The question of the formation of an audience is raised by Steve Neale in his account of 'oppositional' practices of exhibition. An increasing number of independent cinemas and film centres in this country are developing a practice of exhibition which attempts to question the relationship between film culture and 'wider' social and political issues. Discussion of

strategies for production, distribution and exhibition in the film culture depend on detailed knowledge of particular areas from which the possibilities for change and development can be better understood. Barry Edson's article in this issue demonstrates how the commercial, 35mm distribution system in the UK works.

Extending recent debates in *Screen* on authorship and discourse to the area of art practice and art history, Griselda Pollock analyses the ways in which art history constructs the artist as the subject of the work of art producing an artistic subject which is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning for that work. Through an examination of the construction of a personality for Van Gogh—as a paradigm of the modern artist and mad genius—she considers the dominant narrative and psychobiographical modes of art history and parallels the representation of the artist in both psychiatric literature and films like *Lust for Life*. She argues the effect of this ideological work is to remove art from historical or textual analysis, and this makes it very difficult to produce a social history of art which stresses the production of meaning.

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PROGRESSIVE TELEVISION AND DOCUMENTARY DRAMA

I WANT TO return, here, to some of the questions which underlay an exchange between Colin McArthur and Colin MacCabe in *Screen* in 1976;¹ a fairly brief exchange which hinged on the adequacy of Colin MacCabe's formulation of the 'classic realist text'² to the television documentary drama, *Days of Hope*. On one level, what was at issue was simply the capacity of the realist form of *Days of Hope* to express or produce contradiction; at a more profound level, however, what was at stake was the way in which the notion of 'progressiveness' in television is to be conceived from the perspective of a journal such as *Screen*. 'I find both *Days of Hope* and the *Screen* position on Realism problematic', says McArthur, and he argues, from a position sympathetic to the journal, for a greater engagement in public and general debate (such as followed the first transmission of *Days of Hope* in 1975), and for a more clearly declared resistance to monolithic theoretical categories. In his reply, MacCabe acknowledges the need for 'the kind of thorough consideration of both television and the cultural and political situation which McArthur urges', and argues that *Screen's* past work provides a starting point for an engagement with wider issues: 'The work continues.'³

My interest in returning to this exchange after four years is less to arbitrate in the dispute, more to continue the work in a limited way on the more general point of documentary drama's place within television, and its relation to notions of 'progressive realism'. The work is largely that of digging over the ground. Some ghosts need to be laid, and others will rise to haunt the text. So be it: the work continues again . . .

1 Colin McArthur, 'Days of Hope', *Screen*, vol 16, no 4, Winter 1975/6; Colin MacCabe, 'Days of Hope — a Response to Colin McArthur', *Screen*, vol 17, no 1, Spring 1976.

2 Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian theses', *Screen* vol 15, no 2, Summer 1974.

3 MacCabe, op cit.

In considering documentary drama's place within television it seems useful to situate it alongside some of the terms and assumptions which have been taken up by television and by television critics in thinking about drama; so the article begins with a couple of detours through notions of television drama, its relationship to theatre, and the pervasiveness of the term 'naturalism'. In these detours, my impressions have been informed by a reading of all issues of *The Radio Times* and *The Listener* during the 1960s, a period which seemed to be interesting both as a formative, 'post-primitive' stage, and as a period which has been widely constituted as some kind of 'Golden Age' of television drama. Clearly, neither journal can be expected to produce an advanced critical position: their function is rather that of an ungarded discourse, exposing the terms in which drama was thought, giving a sense of television's address. Clearly, also, there is a risk in generalising from a historically specific period: the generalisations, however, are those which the conservatism of television's theoretical and critical discourses permits. While television changes, there is a remarkable continuity in the way it talks about itself.

Television and the single play

It is not uncommon for the majority of viewers to see, regularly, as much as two or three hours of drama, of various kinds, every day. The implications of this have scarcely begun to be considered.

Raymond Williams⁴

The importance of drama for television hardly needs restating. Not only, as Williams indicates, is it massively there, regularly, in its various kinds, but it is also, as a general characteristic of television, everywhere: 'the dramatic', spilling over the edges of programming categories, ordering the viewer's attention; the 'little dramas' which Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow expose and 'make strange' in their *World in Action* analysis.⁵ Given this importance, the lack of rigorous attention to television drama itself and to the television play is surprising. At a formal level, there are questions of the mechanisms of the look and of the subject of television drama which have barely begun to be asked; questions which are important not only for television itself, bringing to it work which has been done in film, but also for theory: television in its different specificity, offers a resistance to universalised theories of representation, and to essentialisms of vision.

More centrally here, television drama raises difficult political

⁴ Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana/Collins, 1974.

⁵ See Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television: a world in action', *Screen*, vol 18, no 2, Summer 1977.

questions. Part of the hesitancy in engaging with drama production may come from a reasonable suspicion of the way in which the cultural prestige of 'serious drama' is used by television and television reviewing. Or it may come from an assessment of the increasingly marginal place which theatre and theatrical forms occupy in present culture. Either way, what is clear is that the vast majority of politically engaged attention has been directed towards the forms of representation of actuality (current affairs, documentary, news), or to popular genres (soap opera, situation comedy, light entertainment). I want to offer here an argument for the importance of 'serious drama' within a political understanding of television.

Firstly, and somewhat tentatively, within certain areas of social and/or sexual unease, the single play or play series seems to function for television as some kind of cutting edge, working to extend television's social or sexual discourse. Drama tests, and occasionally extends, what it is possible not only to say, but also, and more perilously, to show. It is possible for television to discuss homosexuality within the context of current affairs, but a play like *Coming Out* shows gay men in bed – albeit within a narrative which offers a liberal travesty of gay politics. The effect of *Cathy Come Home* was derived precisely from the *showing* of evidence which was already available as statistics for discussion. I register this point tentatively, and will come back to it in discussing notions of progressiveness, because the precise balance between 'progress' and 'regress', between progressive inclinations and the received conventions of narrative and dramatisation, seems to me problematic: more problematic, for television in its specific social circulation, than a theory of texts has allowed. For the moment, I am simply insisting on the necessary recognition that television's discourse is not static, but is under continual revision and extension, and I am suggesting that the single play or play series has a crucial functional role in that revision and extension. Given the social place which television occupies, any mechanism of change in its discourse seems important. At the same time, there are distinctions: there is change and there is change; there is 'progressiveness' and there is 'permissiveness'. My argument for the tentative and potential progressiveness of the extension of television's discourse is not the same as a campaign for liberalisation, for the extension of the easy liberal discourse which appropriates and consumes unease and contradiction. The discussion of television drama's progressiveness will ultimately have to in-

volve some consideration of the form of its discourse as well as its content.

Secondly, and more assertively, drama's extension of the television discourse becomes politically important in a concrete way at the point at which it confronts censorship. It is precisely the extension of what can be said and shown that concerns the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, and, more importantly, it is an uncertainty as to what can and cannot be shown which creates nervous reactions within institutional control. Explicit censorship is always a problem for broadcasting which claims public responsibility, since it exposes the tensions within that claim, opens up contradictions between broadcasting's declared principles and the determinations of its practice, and disturbs its view of itself: a confusion arises between the role of guardian and the role of public servant. Thus the censorship of current affairs programmes on Ireland throws into question again and again television's claim to be an independent, and hence objective, reporter. Clearly, broadcasting has developed a vocabulary to deal with such a confusion of roles, and, in suppressing current affairs material, can offer apparently clear criteria in terms of 'national security', 'civic responsibility', 'objectivity', or simple 'truth to fact'; criteria, that is, which may throw a shadow over notions of 'independence' and 'the public's right to know', but which carry with them the appearance of reasonable authority which will seriously divide the audience only along already established political lines. The censorship of drama, on the other hand, relies on a much less secure language: 'taste', 'public sensibility', 'the little gap between fact and fiction'; and it treads on a substantial area of the liberal consensus involving assumptions about the relationship of art and society, and about the creative artist's right to express him- or herself. Assumptions which broadcasting shares and supports in its insistence on the 'seriousness' of drama ('Drama is the most deeply penetrating way of knowing what it is to be human.' – *Radio Times*, 4th April, 1968) and on the necessary encouragement of creative freedom ('These twenty plays are the result of an invitation to authors of fame or promise to write for television without being subject to dictation on the kind of play required'. – *Radio Times*, 23rd September, 1960). Within the context of its pronouncements, it is never comfortable for the institution to impose limits on what may be penetrated by 'serious drama', or to accept the role of curtailing the freedom of the artist.

Now, institutional discomfort is not in itself a cause for concern,

and the contradictions it displays may be available only to an audience which is looking for them. A large part of the political importance of the censorship of drama lies less in its effects on public awareness, and more in the gap which it creates within the institutions between the 'creators' and the 'controllers'. Censorship in any form produces within television a certain kind of struggle which cannot simply be discounted because it tends to express itself within the terms of liberalism and freedom of expression, rather than in terms of the nature of the determinations which produce censorship. It is within the ideological and tactical groupings and regroupings of such struggles and tensions that programmes are made, some of which may escape the limits of what has been hitherto acceptable. Conflicts over censorship take different forms in different areas: in television journalism what is felt to be under attack is the journalist's professionalism, and the response is frequently professional guile and strategy. Historically, the dramatist has seemed less prepared for censorship, more surprised by it, relying on the assumed consensus that it is the artist's inalienable right to express the world the way he or she sees it. More recently, necessary shifts in response are appearing. But the general point I am making is that the political importance of television drama is tied up with the place which drama occupies in the movements of relationships within the institutions, and cannot be thought simply in terms of its form or its content, nor even exclusively in terms of the contact between the programme and its audience. Censorship, either public or internal, is important for the part it plays in these movements.

But, always accepting the importance of explicit censorship as an exposed point of contradiction, it is also necessary to insist on the political importance of the contradictions implicit in the discourses about 'serious drama' which circulate in the area between the campaigns for liberalisation on the one hand and the actual, overt exercise of censorship on the other. The liberal aspects of the extension of social discourse have always been accepted within television drama, and while explicit censorship is an anathema on every side, 'provocativeness' is a positive value. This point is worth documenting. An unattributed *Radio Times* introduction to the 1966/67 season of the 'Wednesday Play':

The aim of the Wednesday Play . . . is to provide one of those growing points – not only in television, but in the life of the nation – at which, the Pilkington Report suggested, 'the challenges to existing assumptions and beliefs are made, where the claims to

new knowledge and new awareness are stated'. It is one of these key series in which broadcasting must be most willing to make mistakes; for if it does not it will make no discoveries. Mistakes draw criticism. Discoveries are uncomfortable. Both compel controversy. So on occasion does the Wednesday Play. It would be surprising – and disappointing – if it did not.

Radio Times, 2nd November, 1966

Or Tony Garnett, introducing the 1965/66 season:

To tell our stories, we shall have to break a lot of old rules about what is permissible in television drama; and although we shall not set out to offend people, we may be provocative – but out of a compassion that comes from a concern for human beings.

Radio Times, 7th October, 1965

'Provocativeness' and 'controversy' are recurrent terms in discussions of, or introductions to, the *Wednesday Play* series throughout the 1960s: terms which are celebrated by the drama producers, script editors and writers as indicating an engagement with the social problems of the day, and with the audience (the *Radio Times* continually holds out an invitation to the audience to participate in discussing the social problems which the series deals with).

The official discourse, as always, is more cautious, but it too has a certain Achilles heel in the notion of 'creative talent', and the right of the artist (never absolute, always liable to revision) to express his firmly held convictions. Thus, an official study, *Taste and Standards in BBC Programmes*, conducted by a BBC committee for its General Advisory Council in 1973, concludes:

Outstanding programmes have come about through an apparent defiance of accepted practice. Culloden, for instance, or Till Death Us Do Part, or some of the early Wednesday Plays all, to a greater or lesser extent, succeeded because their makers possessed the conviction and the talent to interpret in a new and challenging way the principle outlined [in this paper]. Policy which stultified true capability would be no more worth defending than that which proved too slight to check the excess of the less talented people.

'Excess' is simply a question of lack of 'talent'. But if the liberal response within such a study is to give talent its head, the institutional response is to keep a firm grip on its safeguards: 'referral up'. The report ends with an unusually clear warning to the unwary, and to those whose 'talent' may be subject to question:

The disadvantage in the system is the obvious one that arises from a producer's failure to realise that he has a problem which ought to be referred upwards. It may not always be a problem which will directly affect his programme, but it may have implications for his department or his output service of which his superiors ought to be informed. A producer's awareness of such consequential problems depends on the degree to which information is passed to him by his superiors about the wider affairs and interests of the BBC. It also depends on good management which can sense, even when the producer does not, that there is likely to be a problem of some magnitude

As Huw Wheldon, in the pamphlet Control of Subject Matter in BBC Programmes, expressed it: 'The wrath of the Corporation in its varied human manifestations is particularly reserved for those who fail to refer'.

This is the language of a paternal authority assuming control of its area of responsibility: 'the wrath of the Corporation', and the self-effacing joke surrounding it. But while the system it proposes gives a very clear indication of the ideal which it has in mind, the actual situation with which the authority has to deal is full of uncertainties which it itself invites: the lines between 'conviction' and 'excess', between the 'talented' and the 'less talented', between 'provocation' and 'offence'. It is along those lines that the skirmishes take place.

Circulating between these two discourses, then – the 'creative' and the 'official' – are the terms which are necessary to understand the aspirations, force and contradictions within which television drama is produced, an unstable system rather than a clearly determined control: the 'challenge to existing assumptions and beliefs'; 'uncomfortable discoveries'; 'conviction'; 'controversy'; 'offence'; 'mistakes'; 'the wider affairs and interests of the BBC'; 'the wrath of the Corporation in its varied human manifestations'; 'reference upwards'. Rather than relying on a model made up of sets of controls, determinations, and easy appropriations, or on an apparatus in which the dominant ideology simply dominates, this play of forces within the institutional discourse suggests a way of explaining how 'controversial' documentary dramas like *Days of Hope* or *Law and Order* can be commissioned, made, shown, celebrated and condemned, then withheld despite protest, then reshowed in apparent deference to the protest.

The single play or play series is not essential to television. It has been virtually absent from American television for some time, and its expense and awkwardness within the schedules have made it

perpetually precarious in Britain: bulletins on the ill health and imminent death of the single play were appearing in *The Radio Times* and *The Listener* in the early 1960s. It has been preserved on British television because it confers a certain cultural 'prestige', a 'seriousness', on television as a whole. But in order to function in this way, in order to be 'serious', drama occasionally has to appear to overstep limits, to show what has not been shown before. The tension surrounding this is politically important within the institutions, and is an important factor in determining the movements of forces within television. The nature of its political importance within the programmes is more uncertain: I propose to come back to that uncertainty in its particular relationship to documentary drama.

Television and theatre

Simply a note here, a marker to identify a field for consideration: the importance for the history of television of the relationship between television drama and theatre. If American television seems to be most readily identified by the physical, commercial and aesthetic links with Hollywood, British television has seemed to define many of its practices and aesthetics in relation to theatre. Reviewing for *The Listener* in 1964, John Russell Taylor defined 'perfect television material' as,

in theatrical terms the one-act play subject, built around a single incident or situation rather than a fully articulated plot.

The Listener, 9th January, 1964

Acting is mentioned in reviews in much the same way as it appears in theatre reviews, and indeed the cross-over of actors between theatre and television drama inevitably contributes to the definition of what a television performance should look like. Whereas American drama serials (*Washington: Behind Closed Doors*, *Holocaust*, the 'Best Sellers' series) feature actors who can be sold as stars because of their familiarity in cinema, the stars of British television drama have predominantly been created in the theatre, and do most of their work there. The relationship to theatre is part of what gives 'serious drama' its prestige within television. And at a basic level, the studio technology of the formative period in the 1950s and 1960s, with its continuous performance and its jealously rationed editing, encouraged theatre acting. It also encouraged an attention to acting at the expense of an attention to *mise en scène*. *Mise en scène* for studio drama tended to function

(and still does) like theatre scenery (an appropriate background for the acting), rather than like the meticulously prepared, almost autonomous symbolic discourse of cinema. It is difficult to think of British television drama in terms of visual pleasure.

But the most marked feature which can be attributed to a respect for the theatrical mode of production is the privilege granted within single play drama to the writer and his or her creativity.

What the television theatre needs most is new writers . . . In television the primacy of the word requires special emphasis because it is often denied by an electronic folklore of phrases like 'immediacy', 'visualisation', and worst of all 'personality'.

Frederick Laws, Listener, 8th February, 1962

The position of the writer has clearly shifted over the last twenty years, and there is now much more evidence of the formation of 'teams' – Garnett/Loach/Allen, Trodd/Potter – but much of the prestige of drama is still accorded to and derived from its writers (think simply of the presentation of credits in *The Radio Times*). This defines a dominant attitude to television drama, albeit one which was already being contested in the 1960s by critics like Derek Hill and television writers like Troy Kennedy Martin, both of whom invoked the status of the director in the cinema.

What is most interesting about the privilege granted to the writer is the assumption it makes about the neutrality of television itself. Television is offered to writers as a passive instrument with which to work their creative will:

Too many writers at first acquaintance with television tend to become over-awed by the mysteries of technique about which so much has been written. The producer should aim to liberate the writer from those entanglements – to encourage him to express his idea as he sees it and only at a later stage to begin to translate or reshape the work in terms of technical resources.

Michael Bakewell (formerly BBC Head of Plays),
'The Producer and the Television Play', Listener, 7th July, 1966

And the theatre playwright David Rudkin, asked if he finds writing for television much different, says:

Well, in the end, no, because I found that as soon as I forgot about the medium the writing was just as the writing always had been. I just had to forget that the medium was there.

Encore, no 50, July-August, 1967, p 7

6 See Stuart Hall, 'Television and Culture', *Sight & Sound*, vol 45, no 4, Autumn 1976.

7 See Troy Kennedy Martin, 'Nats Go Home: first statement of a new drama for television', *Encore*, no 48, March/April 1964.

8 John McGrath, 'TV Drama: the case against naturalism', *Sight & Sound*, vol 46, no 2, Spring 1977.

This is the utopia of an absent medium-meaning produced simply out of the idea. The producer is there merely to package the writer's sensibility, to give the word its appropriate shape. The idea of television itself as a producer of meanings is submerged in an instrumentalism which confers on writers the freedom to express themselves, with a little help with the technical bits: an instrumentalism, that it, which establishes the traditional division of labour between creativity and technique, the realm of the artist and the realm of the mere producer, and which perpetuates within discourse about television the fiction of the neutral relay⁶ offering unmediated access to a plurality of statements, positions, convictions. What this fiction within discourse does is discourage theoretical reflection on the medium, and it gives a secondary and quasi-autonomous status to questions of form: form comes after and is a separable issue. The privilege given to writers and their ideas goes some way towards explaining the astonishing formal conservatism of television drama over the past twenty-five years, a conservatism which has survived considerable technological change. Much of the relationship to theatre, then, was and is regressive. Based both on the cross-over of personnel between the two media, and on a respect for theatre's 'high cultural' standing, television has absorbed theatre's aesthetic of creativity, an aesthetic which carries along with it a resistance to theorisation, and a separation of idea and form. The conservatism of the theatrical connection has been attacked by television 'dissidents' from Troy Kennedy Martin⁷ to John McGrath,⁸ but still largely defines the dominant assumptions about the television play.

But it is not enough simply to lay the attachment to theatre at the door of cultural snobbery, and leave it there. The relation of television to theatre may also help to explain the drama producers' anxiety that they should be seen to be controversial. What has to be preserved in the relationship is the memory of the key position which theatre occupied in the left-liberal cultural revolt in the period immediately after 1956, a year which was marked not only by Hungary, Suez, and the splits within the British Communist Party, but also by the Royal Court production of *Look Back in Anger* which initiated critical and popular discourses in which the renaissance of British theatre was associated with protest and 'Angry Young Men'. In the late fifties and early sixties, theatre was a pivotal site of cultural and social dissension, informing other cultural practices (Lindsay Anderson and Free Cinema, the debate about 'commitment') with its attack on 'the Establishment'. However much the theatre of Osborne and Wesker now is to be criti-

cised for its sentimentalism and its liberalism, for television drama, then, to identify itself with that theatre cannot be construed as mere cultural snobbery but has to be seen as some kind of partisan shift.

That is to say, while at the formal and aesthetic level the relationship of television drama and theatre can be attacked for its conservatism, at the level of institutional positions, ideologies, and discourses it cannot simply be homogenised as a reactionary cultural attitude, but can be traced out in two contradictory 'traditions': one tradition which crudely can be identified with the Royal Court or with Joan Littlewood's theatre, and the other which can be identified with the persistence of an Edwardian theatre. Thus theatre can be identified with both the conservatives of television drama, and with the dissidents: it was in the magazine *Encore*, 'The Voice of Vital Theatre', that Troy Kennedy Martin delivered his assault on the naturalism of television drama.

Boring naturalism

The ingredients were much as ever: the rooms, the squabbles, and so on. Boring naturalism was transcended by two things: spot-on dialogue and humour.

David Pryce-Jones, review in Listener, 8th April, 1976

The idea of naturalism as nothing more than a negative – an absence of style, of craft, of 'spot-on dialogue and humour' – as a form which is either 'lapsed into' or 'transcended', is recurrent in critical discourses about television drama, and indeed the pressure on the term from all sides has produced a collapse in its meaning which may well be beyond rescue. Naturalism appears simply as bad realism.

On one level, exactly following a pattern established in the nineteenth century in critical and popular reactions to the work of Zola, naturalism is associated with sordidness, depression, the 'kitchen sink': 'the rooms, the squabbles, and so on'. The dismay of the critics is repeated in the complaints of the audience against depressing stories with inconclusive endings. A letter from 1961 is typical of a number of letters of its kind, and also serves to remind us of the social place which television once occupied:

Once, the BBC Sunday play meant a gathering of the family round the set. It was a regular occasion and any visitors who dropped in were expected to join the circle. Now, however, everybody seems to find something better to do than to watch and listen to the morbid

- 9 Emile Zola, 'Naturalism on the Stage', in *The Experimental Novel & Other Essays*, trans Sheridan, New York, Haskell House, 1964, pp 123-4.

- 10 Georgy Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe', in *Writer & Critic*, trans Kahn, Merlin Press, 1970, p 146.

meanderings of neurotics and other unhappy people. The once-pleasant family hour is as dead as a Dodo.

Radio Times, 2nd February, 1961

Not only are the plays about neurotics and unhappy people, but they also meander: again, John Russell Taylor's single incident or situation rather than a fully articulated plot; again, more importantly, the nineteenth century Naturalists privileging of description as against plot, of reporting on nature and on the environment as against a strong narrative and dramatic line with a fully elaborated resolution. Zola's statement of this in *Naturalism on the Stage* is polemical, and no doubt over-stated in terms of his own novels, but it gives a clear indication of priorities:

I have said that the naturalistic novel is simply an inquiry into nature, beings, and things. It no longer interests itself in the ingenuity of a well-invented story, developed according to certain rules. Imagination has no longer place, plot matters little to the novelist, who bothers himself with neither development, mystery, nor dénouement . . . You start from the point that nature is sufficient, that you must accept it as it is, without modification or pruning; it is grand enough, beautiful enough to supply its own beginning, its middle and its end . . . The work becomes a report, nothing more.⁹

The reaction against nineteenth century naturalism has a long history: anathematised in the novel for its lack of form, and in the theatre for its lack of drama (Stanislavski regretted the occasional lapses into naturalism of the Moscow Art Theatre), it has come to be thought of as a mistake on the various routes to realism. The most articulate and most sustained critique is probably that of Lukács, who not only succeeds in differentiating naturalism from realism as a difference in method – the descriptive and the narrative – rather than as simply a failure of achievement, but also attempts to identify the political and ideological weaknesses of the 'descriptive method':

The decisive ideological weakness of the writers of the descriptive method is in their passive capitulation to these consequences, to these phenomena of fully developed capitalism, and in their seeing the result but not the struggles of the opposing forces. And even when they apparently do describe a process – in the novel of disillusion – the final victory of capitalist inhumanity is always anticipated.¹⁰

The popular complaint against the 'morbid meanderings' of the television play is repeated in Lukács' complaint against the ultimate political capitulation of the novel of disillusion.

For television, Troy Kennedy Martin in 1964¹¹ traces television naturalism to its roots in the American television plays of Chayevsky, and to the influence of the Actor's Studio and the teachings of Strasberg and Stanislavski. The defining features which he associates with this television naturalism are (a) a preoccupation with 'people's verbal relationships with each other', and a consequent privileging of dialogue at the expense of action, and (b) a strict observance of natural time, which meant that editing simply followed the characters rather than expressing a view of them. Both of these features Kennedy Martin associates with the regressive theatrical connection, and the 'new wave' which he proposes – 'The medium must be released so that a new generation of writers can use it' – is to develop new narrative styles exploiting the possibilities of cinematic montage and learning from the work of the French New Wave – interestingly it is to Resnais rather than to Godard that he refers. Kennedy Martin's article is important both as a polemic which continues to be influential,¹² and as a 'denaturalisation' of theatrical naturalism for television drama, a refusal to accept the technological or aesthetic essentialisms in which naturalism and theatre produce the inevitable forms of television.

It is beyond the scope of this article to go much further, and the reader is referred to the considerably more elaborated account of television naturalism developed by Raymond Williams¹³, but two points of importance should be established from the above. Firstly, there is the historical association of naturalism with forms of political progressiveness and reformism: Zola's polemics for naturalism were also conducted as attacks against the politically reactionary forms of romanticism. For television, this is uncertain ground, a little minefield of 'formalisms' and 'reformisms'. Clearly the struggle to develop new forms is important: there is an urgent political need to resist the numbing conservatism of television drama and to open it up to less cosy representations, and if this struggle is to be conducted against something called 'naturalism', so be it. But naturalism in any kind of historical sense is something more than a form, a mere absence of style, or a looseness of narrative: it has served within a politics of radical humanism to introduce into the social discourses of theatre and literature, at certain points in their histories, an element (the working class, women, social injustice) which had previously been excluded. The

11 Troy Kennedy Martin, *op cit.*

12 It is quoted extensively in McGrath's James McTaggart Lecture, published in *Sight & Sound*, see note 10.

13 See Williams, 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen*, vol 18, no 1, Spring 1977; and Williams, 'Realism and Non-Naturalism', Edinburgh International Television Festival 1977, Official Programme published by Broadcast.

clear limitation of the 'reports' of naturalism as a form of social consciousness-raising is the ease with which they can be appropriated to levels of sympathy, charity, and an apolitical reformism: the 'new element' is introduced into discourse as if it had always been there, it is easily accommodated within existing forms, it simply adds to social discourse without changing the discourses which are already in play, extending conservative forms of representation without fundamentally troubling them. But for television, the historical association with an ideology of progressiveness at least has to be registered.

Secondly, and relatedly, there is a debate to be conducted, for television, about the specific history, forms and ideologies of naturalism: a debate which the ubiquity of the term in discussions of television drama simply eludes. The debate has concrete reference points in the writing of Lukács, Brecht, Williams, Zola. Here, I can only register a concern that the looseness and ahistorical formalism of the concepts of naturalism which circulate within writing and thinking about television allow an opposition to emerge which is equally formalist, equally loose, encouraging the approval and celebration of the mere appearance of style and stylisation: 'art television'; an 'avant-garde' with Denis Potter at its head. What I think has to be considered for television – for its mode of circulating, for its institutional determinations, for its conservatism – is the possibility of a debate within naturalism as well as a struggle against it. It's in this light that I want to approach documentary drama.

Documentary drama

Drama or documentary? – the 'Scotland Yard' programmes fall uneasily between. Basically these are documentary, each dealing with some different aspect of the extremely complex activities of Scotland Yard. Unfortunately it seems to have been felt, quite wrongly, that this would be insufficiently interesting in itself, so little shots of drama are injected and these give the impression, I am sure the quite unfair impression, that the police are incompetent or venal or both.

Hilary Corke, Listener, 2nd June, 1960

Writing, apparently without irony, in 1960, Hilary Corke anticipates precisely the 'little gap between fact and fiction' which worried William Deedes (editor of the *Telegraph*) in the discussion which followed the transmission of *Days of Hope*, or dismays Lord Carrington over *Death of a Princess*: in a speech to the Anglo-Arab



Scotland Yard
Episode 1, 'Nightbeat'
'The programmes aim at covering every aspect of police activity in the Metropolitan area in strictly documentary terms without devoting any one programme to a particular branch of police work'

Middle East Association, he says, 'The new formula of mixing fact with fiction, dramatisation masquerading as documentary, can be dangerous and misleading'.

The formula is not, in fact, new, and forms of dramatised documentary have been occupying an uneasy place on television for more than twenty years. Before that, dramatic reconstructions of actuality have a history in cinema as old as cinema itself, beginning with Meliès' reconstructions of coronations and assassinations, and continuing with the Soviet cinema's celebrations of the Revolution. For British television, the important cinematic antecedent could be found in the various ideologies and practices which were circulating in the documentary movement in the 1930s and 1940s – from *Fires Were Started* to Ralph Bond and the Co-operative Society films. In American theatre during the Depression, the Federal Theatre Project had developed the Living Newspaper

to dramatise documentation about urban housing, farm-workers' struggles for unionisation, the power industry; and some of this was picked up by left-wing theatre groups in Britain, and subsequently developed by Joan Littlewood in the 1950s and 1960s. On radio, a crucial source of early television genres, dramatised documentaries were a commonplace, and had been given a certain left-wing inflection in the 'radio ballads' devised by Charles Parker and Ewan McColl (who was also associated with Joan Littlewood's theatre) which dramatised areas of working-class life and history. Far from being new, there are a number of histories and traditions which can be followed through from film, theatre, and radio into television.

Two ideas can be identified in this for an understanding of the development of television documentary drama: one, the 'documentary idea', can be associated with Grierson and Walter Lippman and the extension of democracy through social education and the presentation of information in its most accessible form; the other, to the left of this, attempts to recover lost histories and dramatise repressed documents. Television, in its dramatised documentaries of the 1950s and early 1960s, seems to have accepted the form fairly unproblematically within the terms of its social responsibility to inform and educate: there were dramatised documentaries on Scotland Yard, on bankruptcy, on the town vet, on regional symphony orchestras, on a doctor struck off the medical list, on the immigration service. Interestingly, in the light of the subsequent history of the form, these early programmes were as likely to be dismissed for their complicity, as regretted for their unease:

I don't suppose the series will dare suggest an immigration officer can ever behave unreasonably, can abuse his alarming power, can ever become anything less than a sagacious and trustworthy protector of society.

Derek Hill, Listener, 6th September, 1962

These information programmes appeared regularly on BBC until the end of 1962, and then disappeared as a clearly marked form. After 1962 there are isolated events of considerable importance – Peter Watkins' *Culloden* in 1964, the Loach/McTaggart *Up the Junction* in 1965, Peter Watkins' suppressed *The War Game* in 1966 – and the Loach/Garnett *Cathy Come Home* which appears at the end of 1966. It is the line which develops from *Cathy Come Home*, the line associated with the Loach/Garnett label – with the recovery of lost histories, with the exposure of social injustice,

with 'progressive realism' – that I am primarily concerned with here.

Something further should be added to separate this line from other forms of dramatised documentary which have become current. On one side of the line, there are American 'factions' like *Holocaust* or *Washington: Behind Closed Doors*; on the other side there are documentary reconstructions like *Three Days in Szczecin*, or *Invasion*. 'Factions' are constructed along firm dramatic, or melodramatic lines, their 'documentariness' coming from the actuality of their historical referent, rather than from any mixture of forms: there is in fact very little stylistic or narrative distinction between, say, *Holocaust* and the American television serialisation of *From Here to Eternity*. 'Dramadoc', on the other hand, is identified by Leslie Woodhead, producer of *Three Days in Szczecin* for Granada, as 'dramatised journalism':

Our priorities, disciplines, sources and basic motivations are journalistic, and where there is a clash with dramatic values, journalism wins. We make bad plays – not a slogan, just a declaration of priorities.

Listener, 23rd September, 1976

This dramatised journalism is the aggressive development of the earlier innocuous information programmes, dramatising socially important events and documented facts which the cameras were not there to record at the time, the dramatic reconstruction is made necessary by television's need to show.

Each of these forms has its own interest and its own problems, and there is an obvious overlap within all forms of dramatised documentary, particularly between dramatised journalism and documentary drama, the one exploiting the visual rhetoric of the other. For the sake of particularity, however, I am interested here in the relation of documentary drama to drama, rather than its relation to journalism, and while the two forms share the possibility of a confusion between fact and fiction which gives them both an uneasy place within television, each has a formal and functional specificity which needs to be considered separately. Here I am concerned with the particular articulation of the dramatic and the documentary within fictional dramatic narrative, with the way in which the one functions for the other, and with the nature of the unease which the articulation seems to produce.

Within fictional dramatic narrative, it would clearly be a mistake to constitute documentary drama as a homogeneous category,

and there are important shifts and developments between, say, *Cathy Come Home* or *The Big Flame* on the one hand, and *Days of Hope* and *Law and Order* on the other: Nor is it simply a process of evolutionary change: *The Spongers* probably has more in common with *Cathy Come Home* than it has with *Law and Order*. The variations – in narrative construction, in camera technique, in lighting, in acting – are important, but it seems more useful here to establish the consistencies: it is, in fact, one of the defining characteristics of documentary drama that it has a consistent televisual style, a visual appearance and a relationship to narrative space which is particular to it, which is recognisable, which circulates its own meanings. This consistency and specificity can be elaborated in terms of *mise en scène*, or more precisely in terms of the articulation of two looks – the look of the documentary, and the look of the dramatic fiction.

By the 'dramatic look' I mean the system of looks and glances which is familiar from fictional film, and which works to produce the consistency and movement of the narrative, placing the spectator in relation to it – the rhetoric, that is, of narrative realist film: eye-line match, field/reverse-field, point-of-view. This rhetoric centres the narrative: it establishes, within a world of events, scenes, characters, and little narratives, the line and the connections which are to be privileged. It orders the world into a readable hierarchy. It is worth noting that, made on film, documentary drama tends, within the articulation of its dramatic look, to have a more highly elaborated narrative rhetoric, with a more cinematic deployment of field/reverse-field or point-of-view, than the television drama which has its roots in the multi-camera techniques of the studio.

By the 'documentary look' I mean the system of looks which constructs the social space of the fiction, a social space which is more than simply a background, but which, in a sense, constitutes what the documentary drama wishes to be about, the 'document' which is to be dramatised. Thus, *Cathy Come Home* and *The Spongers* wish to be about the social environment of sections of the community and the bureaucracy which oppresses them; *Days of Hope* claims as its subject the whole of the labour movement from rural community to organised labour. This attention to the social environment and to the community is what connects documentary drama with the ideology of naturalism:

We are looking for the cause of social evil; we study the anatomy of classes and individuals to explain the derangements which are

produced in society and in man . . . No work can be more moralising than ours, then, because it is upon it that law should be based.

Zola, To the Young People of France (*op cit*)

This connection with naturalism can be extended to the level of method: Zola's 'experimental method' consisted of observing the material world closely and then analysing it 'scientifically' by setting in motion an 'experiment', a narrative situation, to see what would happen. In a similar way, documentary drama seems to produce its analysis by setting in motion a dramatic experiment within the world observed and constructed by the documentary look.

Observed and constructed. The documentary look is not the perfect vision of an actual world, but operates, as does the dramatic, within a specific rhetoric which is not innocent, offering an objective, true social space, but which works within rules and strategies to produce a social space which is also a narrative, fictional space. What seems specific to documentary drama as compared with narrative realist film is that, whereas classical realist film depends to a greater or lesser extent on the illusion of unmediated vision, on a transparency of form and style, documentary drama operates a rhetoric of mediated style which is clearly marked, but which has a prior association with truth and neutrality. If classical realist film depends on a certain invisibility of form, and on a spectator who forgets the camera, the documentary look takes its appearance of objectivity from its place within the conventions of documentary: thus, the hand-held camera, the cramped shot, natural lighting, inaudible sound. The appearance in the fiction of the documentary look, easily visible but unsteady and apparently unpremeditated, establishes the impression of a basis of unproblematic fact on which the dramatic 'experiment' can be conducted, and which will guarantee its validity.

In one sense, the documentary look takes different forms, finding its guarantee in different sources, different documentary conventions. While black and white film was still acceptable for television, *The War Game* could rely on hand-held camera and grainy film, the conventions of immediacy, reportage, and *cinéma vérité*. *Law and Order*, particularly in the early episodes, works with the rhetoric of a concealed, investigative camera, spying on its object behind cover (cf *Rome Open City*): it also depends on the illusion that, where sound is inaudible and language incom-



The War Game
(1966)



Days of Hope

prehensible, they cannot have been created but must simply have been captured (cf Altman). *Days of Hope* has the problem of being visually beautiful, a quality which, for film, has an association with composition rather than with truth, but it seems to me to take its guarantee from a notion of 'old photography', the guarantee of which resides in its 'primitiveness' and naïvety. I am thinking generally of the compositions involving groups of characters, or involving characters positioned close to windows, naturally lit from the side. The point of interest is that all of these strategies of the documentary look rely less on the guarantees of their own reflection of the real world and more on a reference to other formal



Days of Hope



conventions which are associated with reflection.

At another, and I think more fundamental level, the documentary look finds its consistency in the rhetoric of the 'unplanned' or 'unpremeditated' shot: the camera surprised by the action.

If you are making a documentary and there was just a cameraman in the room and he was following the conversation, he would never be at somebody when they started to speak. He would follow the conversation. That's what we tried to do really, to let the conversation call for the cuts, rather than the camera knowing who was going to speak next and, therefore, always being in at the start of a sentence.

Ken Loach interview in Cinema Papers, April 1976

In the last episode of *Days of Hope*, Sarah and Philip are in a pub; Sarah raises her pint of beer and proposes a toast to the success of the General Strike¹; a voice off-camera responds, 'I'll drink to that'; Sarah, still in mid close-up, acknowledges the speaker, still off-camera²; and only then does the camera pan round to look for the person who had taken it by surprise³. The little scene denies a script, denies planning, denies rehearsal, and establishes in their place a complete world which the camera can only capture, cannot have constructed, a world which goes on beyond the fiction. This continuous world is the narrative space of documentary drama, a space which is familiar in its outlines from Bazin's celebration of Renoir. The truth of the world is discovered in the 'experiment', not produced but producing itself, organically, from the inside, in the absence of external interference, premeditated control, or prior knowledge. It is spontaneous, therefore true.

Now this could easily degenerate into a naïve critique of deception and cheating; or into the equally naïve assumption that the film-makers are not aware of what they are doing. Clearly they know, and, fairly reasonably, expect us to know that they are producing fictions, and exploiting certain conventions. My point is not to expose trickery, but to try to point to the bases and the determinations of conventions which are not innocent instruments, simply available for any use, but which come to documentary drama already weighted with significances and associations. More immediately, and more concretely, I am interested in what the articulation of the dramatic look and the documentary look does within the fiction.

I have already suggested that the dramatic look gives the narrative a centre, orders the heterogeneity of the world 'captured' by the documentary look, and establishes the privileged figures and events. Thus there is an easily discernible story running through the history of the working class in *Days of Hope* and in *Law and Order* we have no difficulty in picking out the figures of the Detective, the Villain, and the Brief from the total system of the institutions of the law. The problem is that, in the end, though



1



2



3

Days of Hope
(1965)

documentary drama within its naturalist project wishes to be about the community and the social environment, there is always the risk that the balance will fail, the dramatic narrative will impose its resolutions on the documentary disorder, and the drama will end up being about the privileged, centred individuals. Thus, at the end of *Days of Hope*, we are as likely to be interested in whether Sarah and Philip will patch up the problems of their marriage, as to be interested in the future of the Party and its relationship to the working class. Within the terms of narrative resolutions this is an inevitable risk.

More than this, the rhetoric of the dramatic look inscribes the document into experience. Eye-line match, field/reverse-field, point-of-view are mechanisms which work within film and television to articulate the look of the viewing subject, and to construct a system of viewing places for the spectator within the fiction. The viewing subject identifies with the fictional world through identifying with the looks of the dramatic figures within it. By deploying this rhetoric of looks, documentary drama produces systems of identification which are specific to it as a televisual form and cannot simply be homogenised into a monolithic narrative system, but which nevertheless set in motion a play of sympathetic involvement for the spectator. The spectator experiences the drama. What documentary drama offers (like naturalism) is the experience of the drama, rather than the analysis of (or 'scientific experiment' on) the document. It is therefore vulnerable to the critique of Lukács that it is a 'subjective protest', or to the critique of Brecht that it fails to expose the spectator to the contradictions which have to be worked out. Thus *Days of Hope* offers the experience of history – memory – rather than its analysis; *The Spongers* or *Cathy Come Home* offers the experience of social injustice – bad conscience. The issue of experience and analysis is clearly part of a wider debate, which will have to be picked up again in discussing documentary drama's 'progressiveness'.

If the rhetoric of the drama inscribes the document within narrative and experience, the rhetoric of the documentary establishes the experience as an experience of the real, and places it within a system of guarantees and confirmations. The look of the documentary is qualitatively different, lacking the reverse field of the dramatic look, its 'reversibility'.¹⁴ The documentary look is a look at its object, fixing the object rather than putting its look into play, the object looked at but only itself looking on: the figures of the drama exchange and reverse looks, the figures of the documentary are looked at and look on.

14 In the sense in which Serge Daney uses the term when he criticises Antonioni's documentary on China as the work of a 'contrabandier', smuggling out in images the 'properties' of the Chinese people: see, 'La remise en scene', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no 268-9, July-August, 1976, p 23.

Within the conventions of documentary, the objectifying look is part of the support of truth and neutrality. For documentary drama, however, two looks are in play, and they come to constitute a hierarchy: the rhetoric of the drama operates an exchange of looks between the characters, dramatising their relationship, activating divisions between them and within them, putting them in doubt, giving them an incompleteness which can only be filled by the eventual plentitude of the narrative. The rhetoric of documentary, the fixed and fixing look, constitutes its object – the community, the social environment, the working class – as simply there, unproblematic, already completed, ‘extras’. The working class, the community appears as a simple unquestioned presence, functioning to locate the dramas of others, but not themselves dramatised. I am thinking particularly of *Days of Hope* where the camera continually confirms the drama on the face of an extra who is looking on: the figures of the community – of the documentary look – function as a referent for the drama, guaranteeing its social relevance; but the attention is continually pulled back to the figures at the centre of the drama, to their play of looks, their struggles for knowledge and resolution.

The problem, then, is one of integration. The two discourses, of documentary and of drama, are integrated to produce a movement of confirmations, guarantees and narrativisations back and forth between them. Each functions to support the other rather than to call the other into question; there is no contradiction for the spectator between the drama and the document, but only a confirmation; the tensions are all within the drama, rather than between it and its referent. The discourse is ultimately one of unproblematic truth. This is reinforced by the hierarchies established within the narrative, a narrative which, although it digresses to bring in the life of the community (the club scene in *The Spongers*, or the extended celebration dance at the end of the second episode of *Days of Hope*), nevertheless re-centres itself, pulling attention back towards narrative and resolution.

Documentary drama and ‘progressiveness’

All this, however, does not close off the question of documentary drama’s progressiveness. On one level, the important question is not what the form has been, but what it could be. In this respect, there is a clear model of a potential development of documentary drama in the television production of *The Cheviot, The Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*. Colin McArthur has already commented on



Days of Hope

this in his monograph, *Television and History*,¹⁵ and all I wish to add here (by way of bringing together again McArthur and MacCabe) is the relevance in this connection of the concept of 'separation' which MacCabe mobilises in his essay. 'The Politics of Separation'.¹⁶ MacCabe's interest is in the 'separation-out' of the filmic elements of sound, colour, writing, noise and music in the films of Godard, and he draws the concept of the 'separation of the elements' from Brecht's notes to the opera *Mahagonny*. It is worth quoting from these notes here:

When the epic theatre's method begins to penetrate the opera the first result is a radical separation of the elements. The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production – which always brings up the question 'which is the pretext for what?': is the music the pretext for the events on stage, or are these the pretext for the music? etc – can simply be by-passed by radically separating the elements. So long as the expression 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (or 'integrated work of art') means that the integration is muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be 'fused' together, the various elements will all be equally degraded, and each will act as a mere 'feed' to the rest. The process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against.¹⁷

15 British Film Institute Television Monograph, no 8, 1978.

16 Colin MacCabe, 'The Politics of Separation', *Screen*, vol 16, no 4, Winter 1975/6;

17 Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre in the Epic Theatre: notes to the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed Willett, London, Eyre Methuen, 1977, pp 37-8.

18 Colin MacCabe, 'The Politics of Separation', op cit.

My argument against the documentary drama as it has been formulated has been that, though it is struggling on the right side, it produces itself within a self-confirming integration, and produces a spectator who is also confirmed in an already determined position. As MacCabe argues, though it may expose contradiction, it is 'contradiction which it has already resolved', and it fails 'to produce a contradiction which remains unresolved and is thus left for the reader to resolve and to act out'.¹⁸

For the development of the formal effectiveness of documentary drama, *The Cheviot* . . . represents a radical separation of the discourses of the drama and the discourses of the documentary: the television production is at the same time a drama, a documentary on the way in which the theatrical performance circulated in the Highlands, a historical reconstruction, and a documentary on working conditions in the North Sea oil industry. The elements are not integrated to confirm and support each other, but are clearly separated out and allowed to play against each other. The risk which the theatrical production always ran of being overwhelmed by the exuberance of its own performance is tem-

pered by the possibility which the separation of discourses allows of continually unsettling the spectator's position. The documentary on the present oil industry produces a contemporaneity of history which both undercuts the romanticism of a 'Celtic twilight', and offers a way of seeing this struggle in terms of other struggles. It is the possibility of this collision of documentary and drama, of the refusal of integration, which makes the documentary drama a potentially interesting political form. It also has to be said that, whereas *Cathy Come Home* started a tradition, the model of *The Cheviot* . . . has not yet been followed up.

At another level, progressiveness on television is not ultimately a question of form, of integration or separation, because television occupies a particular social space which makes its progressiveness or regressiveness more difficult to calculate. Thus, however much the ideology within which it operates may be characterised as reformist, the screening of *Cathy Come Home* is an event with material effects within the history of British social work; *Law and Order* is an event within the history of the relations between the police and one of the major media; the screening of *The Big Flame*, coinciding with the Devlin Report on the docks and the Upper Clyde Shipyard sit-in, occurs within a particular conjuncture of events and forces which makes the identification of its political effectivity more complex. Unlike films or plays, television programmes are seen all at once (and reacted to all at once) by a national audience. Because of this, it becomes difficult, and unrewarding, to establish the final conditions for the progressiveness of television. The conjuncture in which programmes are screened has to be critically identified; and because the programmes are made within basically conservative institutions which are both highly determined and highly determining, their place within the politics of the institutions has also to be brought into consideration. The political analysis of a television programme such as *Law and Order* or *The Big Flame* has to go beyond the identification of the politics which it speaks, towards an analysis of the place which it occupies within the political forces and contradictions which are current at the time of its screening, and towards an understanding of its relationship to the other representations which television predominantly circulates and supports.

Also, to argue for the need to develop forms which will produce the spectator in contradiction implies a position within a wider political debate against the political effectiveness of notions of experience and solidarity. For television, I am less confident of this position. Under certain conditions, of which the present may be

one, I want to be able to say that, *for television*, in its specific conditions, it may be politically progressive to confirm an identity (of sexuality or class), to recover repressed experience or history, to contest the dominant image with an alternative identity. Documentary drama seems to me to have occupied a progressive role within television insofar as it has introduced into the discourses of television a repressed political, social discourse which may contribute to an audience's political formation, and may increase its scepticism of the other representations which television offers. I want to be able to say this at the same time as arguing for different ways of looking.

This, in a sense, is to collapse the whole notion of 'the progressive text', whose progressiveness can be measured against some scale of correctness. Within the social space of television, within the politics of its institutions, and within the way it circulates, television programmes have the capacity to be events as much as to be texts. But simply to leave it at that, is to accept a relativism which can only determine progressiveness after the event, and cannot influence the development of progressive forms of representation. Clearly, what is necessary, for a journal such as *Screen*, is to identify and give priority to areas of debate which can be effectively developed in terms of form and politics.

It is in this sense that I am arguing for the importance of documentary drama in particular, and drama in general: in the sense, that is, in which drama and documentary drama represent areas of tension and uncertainty for television, areas in which debate could be effective and in which institutional debates already exist. The question is one of privileging those areas as sites of critical and theoretical engagement: a question of how to respect those areas for their political progressiveness for television; a question, at the same time, of how to argue against them, for an extension of television's discourse in forms which will contest easy images, unsettle its conventional patterns, and break up the homogeneity of its representations.



drama



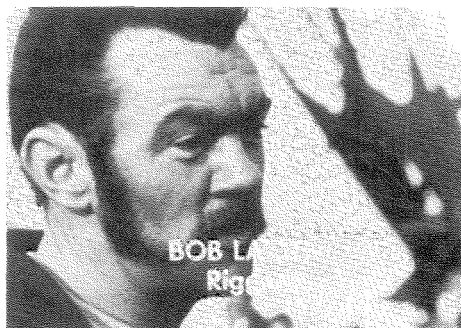
historical reconstruction



theatrical performance



documentary i) reportage



ii) interview

The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1974)

BARRY EDSON

COMMERCIAL FILM DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION IN THE UK

In this article I outline the commercial cinema distribution and exhibition system operating in Britain today. I consider mainly the 35mm distribution system – the problems of ‘alternative’ and 16mm distribution are referred to only in passing. The financial examples which I give are realistic, but rather different from those in the trade papers which do not provide all significant information (eg booking terms and publicity charges). In addition it should be remembered that each film is negotiated individually – financial arrangements are unique to it and often vary considerably from the possibilities sketched here.

Problems besetting the film industry in Britain have often been detailed and among these is our inability to create and sustain an independent, indigenous and marketable product and our consequent dependence upon foreign, largely American finance and thus cultural submission to American initiatives. While new films like

The Europeans, Babylon, Rude Boy, Breaking Glass and others may significantly affect patterns of independent production in Britain, they will only do so if they are allocated enough domestic exhibition outlets to generate interest and revenue.

The distribution and exhibition system in Britain

The major circuits in Britain – Rank, EMI, Classic, Granada and Star cinemas – are notoriously conservative in their programming and the gradual development of multi-auditoria conversions has, paradoxically, led to a decrease in the number of available screens for the ‘floating’ product (ie films available from distributors, large or small, which have not been allocated sufficient playing time in Rank and EMI cinemas). Where a large circuit cinema used to require at least forty-five new films/double feature programmes per year for its main programming, most triple screen cinemas will now usually be satisfied by a change of single feature every three weeks in the largest auditorium and every four or five

Where personal prejudice is evident, this is an expression of private disenchantment, not necessarily a policy position by my professional self or the BFI's Distribution Division.

weeks in the smaller two. Re-issued double-bills of proven box-office winners are the immediate recourse of circuit programmers when empty weeks occur. Increasingly, their second alternative is exploitation sex and horror/violence double-bills on offer from the dozen or so small distribution companies specialising in such programmes. In a less 'sophisticated' era, films such as *Rififi*, *The Wages of Fear*, Louis de Funes and Fernandel comedies, Allegret thrillers like *Market in Women*, and *Young Girls Beware* received Rank and ABC releases complete with subtitles. Classic cinemas programmed with totally indiscriminate publicity virtually every foreign language film available. Today, it is specific policy of Rank and EMI not to book subtitled films. The other circuits, which are usually desperate for first run product to programme competition with the two 'majors' in large city centres, only book them for such situations. Last year *Violette Nozière*, *Tree Of The Wooden Clogs*, *That Obscure Object Of Desire* were among the several subtitled films which failed to play in any Rank or EMI cinema.¹

Any English language film is theoretically considered for exhibition in circuit cinemas. Distributors arrange viewings of their new films for the circuit booking controllers and, depending upon the bookers' reactions to them and the political considerations involved, a comprehensive or limited deal for circuit screenings may be agreed.

There are established 'tie-ups' between certain large distributors and each of the two major circuits. Columbia Pictures'

releases usually go to Rank; Warners to EMI; Twentieth Century Fox – who once owned shares in Odeon cinemas – go to Rank; Paramount, albeit less automatically, to EMI. Rank Film Distributors and Rank Theatres are, incidentally, quite separate and, occasionally, mutually hostile operations. Throughout the country, where no Rank or EMI theatre exists in a particular area, the local Classic, Star, Granada, or independent cinema will have been allocated the right to play Rank or EMI releases. This allocation is controlled by the two main trade organisations: *The Society of Film Distributors* and *The Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association*. Although their committees include people from outside organisations, both SFD and CEA tend to operate to the benefit of large established film distribution and exhibition companies, and have less involvement with the problems of independent producers, distributors and exhibitors.

The term 'independent' is used in this article to describe commercial activity which is not directly controlled by the majors. The major exhibitors are Rank and EMI and, to a lesser extent, the Classics, Granada and Star; the four largest distribution companies are listed below. The last few years have seen the amalgamation of several distribution companies. Columbia, Warner Bros, Twentieth Century Fox, Paramount, MGM, EMI, British Lion all had their own distribution outlets, and are now releasing films as:

Cinema International Corporation (Paramount, Universal, MGM); Rank Film Distributors (Rank, Twentieth Century Fox); United Artists (Columbia-EMI-Warner – Columbia, Warner Bros, EMI).²

The major distributors' new films are offered to circuits first and if a release is

¹ Since this was written the Rank Organisation has decided to show subtitled versions of *The Tin Drum* and *The Marriage of Maria Braun* in some carefully selected venues.

38 obtained, a rigid pattern of bookings applies.³ A pre-sold film (ie one which, because of established success in America, seems sure to attract large audiences already intrigued by ancillary publicity, viz *Star Wars*, *Saturday Night Fever*) has a large publicity budget allocated to it (eg *Grease* £300,000) and many copies are printed in order to obtain a blanket release. The potential earning capacity of such films is considerable, *Grease*, for example, took £5,000,000 at the box-office within six weeks of opening. Because the auditoria of twin and triple cinemas are so small, circuit cinemas retain successful films for extended runs so that an EMI or Rank film on the circuit rarely plays for only one week. However, the circuit booking departments work on the basis that they may require 52 programmes a year per screen. This means that they usually reserve a film for playing, sometimes with an actual date, sometimes on a 'follow-up' basis, and then continually transfer this 'booking' until eventually they can play it off, or until they, or the distributor loses interest or hope, and the film is offered to other circuits/cinemas. Depending on the apparent potential of this 'to-be-dated' film (or the vanity, greed or short-sightedness of the distributor) perhaps a year may elapse before the film is offered away from the original circuit cinema for which it has been reserved.

It is the exhibitor who decides whether a film will 'hold-over' (ie continue playing beyond its initially reserved playing time because of high box-office takes) at the cinema. It is ironic that the distributor of such a long-running film can also be the distributor of a film which is pushed out

again and again. An example of this is the situation which arose between CIC and EMI over *Grease* and *Heaven Can Wait*. CIC intended to release *Heaven Can Wait* in 28 cinemas across London, after the release of the film *Grease*, which they are handling for the Robert Stigwood Organisation at a 30% distribution fee. EMI refused to take off *Grease* while it was still making so much money, and – with £300,000 already committed to publicity – CIC ended up with only 10 cinemas playing the London release of *Heaven Can Wait*. This state of affairs exists throughout the country, and serves to explain why the non-appearance in the provinces a year after their London opening of films like *1900* and *Casanova* or even *Goin' South* or *Breaking Away* does not mean that they will not be or are not dated to circuit cinemas.

Outside the large and small circuit chains, there are the scattered groups of independently owned cinemas, ranging from the 20-plus screens of Scotland's Caledonian Circuit to one-cinema, single screen operations such as the Noverre, Norwich. Most of these, however, follow circuit initiatives in programming. The Regional Film Theatres, co-sponsored by the BFI or Scottish Film Council:

3 When a standard 35mm commercial feature film is released its distribution normally follows a simple pattern: (a) West End opening; (b) London; (c) Key regional cities; (d) Circuit cinemas in other towns; (e) Independents and second runs; (f) 16mm non-theatrical release; not necessarily in this order.

A more specialist film could be distributed along similar lines but since its market is usually more restricted some stages would be omitted as circumstances dictate. All commercial cinemas can 'bar' any proposed commercial operation within a two-mile radius, and can bar a film from any theatrical or non-theatrical venue in the area. Proposers of new theatrical operations must seek trade clearance from the Society of Film Distributors.

2 EMI previously incorporated British Lion, which in turn had earlier incorporated the energetic production/distribution company, Regal Films Ltd.

Cineplex, Sheffield; Aaben, Hulme; Penultimate, Oxford; Aldeburgh Cinema; Arts, Cambridge; Chapter, Cardiff; Arts Lab, Birmingham; Phoenix, Oxford; Cinescene, Brighton; between them comprise the only significant (in trade terms) public exhibition alternatives to the mainstream programming described above. Recently, in Bristol, Star Cinemas experimented with bookings of subtitled and, in their terms, 'esoteric products' with some success. This directly affected the availability of films for screening at the Bristol Arts Centre and Arnolfini, both partly subsidised by the BFI, by restricting the range of first-run subtitled products available to these cinemas.

Audience attendance figures published by the Department of Trade show that audiences are again beginning to decline, and within this general pattern the Regional Film Theatres are under extreme financial pressure to opt for the relatively easy programming of re-runs of proven box-office attractions.

Films are booked at percentage (of net box office take) terms for theatrical screenings; with some exceptions, re-run films can be booked at lower percentages than new films. All other relevant operating costs being equal, therefore, it is possible to make more profit on the tenth screening of *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex* than a first run of *The Role*.

The circuit bookers may not care about film culture, nor appreciate anything other than continued profitability, but they rarely fail to book films which subsequently prove to be profitable. There are exceptions: *The Europeans* was disliked by the circuits, but attracted large audiences where and when it was screened; *Bonnie and Clyde* was originally dismissed by circuit viewers as a 'possible second feature'; *Annie Hall* did not even

rate a Rank West End Theatre for its opening. Nevertheless, most films which are rejected by the circuits and thus offered to others, prove to be box-office flops whatever their cultural standing or quality. Independent cinemas, including RFTs, become understandably wary of English language films being offered first-run by distributors.

Several uneasy months in the life of a distributor

Let us assume that you have acquired the UK distribution rights to three films: a big budget Australian-financed war film, with second rank international star names, *War Film*; an exploitation action film from America, *Exploitation Film*; a long-unavailable Godard, *Art Film*.

You have read the trade press and *Variety* assiduously and paid the producer an advance of £20,000 for *War Film*, against a 50/50 split of distributor's share of box-office receipts, costs off the top. This means that certain costs of distribution, ie prints, publicity material, West End opening publicity, Press Reception etc will be paid first out of takings at cinemas, then you will recoup your £20,000 advance out of the half of the distributor's returns which are allocated to the producer. You buy a copy of the film; this costs £1,200 – subsequent prints ordered in bulk will be cheaper but you are cautious. You arrange for Rank to view the film and ask for the Leicester Square Theatre to book it for a minimum of eight weeks. Rank like the film and can fit the film in at the Leicester Square Theatre eight months hence and are willing to programme the film as a Rank release nine months hence.

You agree a 'house figure' or 'house nut' for the West End cinema of £6,000, ie the cinema retains the first £6,000 of each week's takings to cover its simple

40 CLASSIC

<i>Theatres</i>	<i>Screens</i>		<i>Theatres</i>	<i>Screens</i>
76	28 x 1 = 28	London	24	52
	22 x 2 = 44	South	9	18
	19 x 3 = 57	Glasgow	6	12
	5 x 4 = 20 ¹	West	5	9
	2 x 5 = 10 ²	Midlands	5	14
		Yorkshire	7	15
		North East	6	15
		Lancashire	14	24
			76	159

EMI

<i>Theatres</i>	<i>Screens</i>		<i>Theatres</i>	<i>Screens</i>
155	71 x 1 = 71	London	37	90
	21 x 2 = 42	South	13	20
	55 x 3 = 165	West	11	22
	6 x 4 = 24 ³	Home Counties		
	2 x 5 = 10 ⁴	& London	14	29
		East	16	26
		Midlands	13	30
		Yorkshire	14	25
		London/Manchester	16	26
		North	21	44
			155	312

RANK

<i>Theatres</i>	<i>Screens</i>		<i>Theatres</i>	<i>Screens</i>
133	63 x 1 = 63	North London	18	33
	16 x 2 = 32	South London	21	37
	52 x 3 = 156	Home Counties		
	1 x 4 = 4 ⁵	& East Anglia	15	30
	1 x 5 = 5 ⁶	South Coast &		
		Channel Isles	15	29
		Midlands	14	35
		West & North West	16	34
		Yorkshire &		
		Lancashire	18	33
		North & Scotland	16	29
			133	260

STAR

Theatres	Screens
43	12 x 1 = 12
	11 x 2 = 22
	11 x 3 = 33
	8 x 4 = 32 ⁷
	1 x 5 = 5 ⁸
43	104

- 1 Chelsea, Hampstead, Tooting, Loughborough, Quinton.
- 2 Oxford St, Moulin.
- 3 Enfield, Edgware Rd, Bexley Heath, Purley, Brighton, Belfast.
- 4 Fulham Rd, Glasgow.
- 5 Liverpool.
- 6 Nottingham.
- 7 Chorley, Manchester, Bristol, Blackpool, Carlisle, Newcastle, Tottenham, Newark.
- 8 Manchester.

running costs. For convenience, you agree that all net takings above the 'house figure' will be split 70/30 in your favour. You will, of course, be responsible for all expenses involved in publicising the film – TV advertising, poster sites, lineage advertising in London evening papers and so on. Already you are committed to: £20,000 recoverable (in theory) advance; £1,200 first print cost; £1,000 censorship fee (based on running time); £20,000 publicity (for opening run); £1,000 general expenditure (trailers, posters, stills, freight charges etc) Total: £43,200.

For the Rank circuit release, you do not want to get involved in a *James Bond*-type operation, with 360 prints being unleashed on the nation for a huge across-the-country opening, with concomitant half-million pound TV advertising campaign. You will be able to manage with 30 prints. These cost another £20,000 but the laboratory will wait thirty-one days for the money. In company with virtually all other film distributors in the country the prints of your films are stored with and despatched to cinemas by the Rank Organisation Despatch Department, now in Perivale. You have an agreed storage contract fee with them, and they charge you some £8 every time they send out a print. You will also be charged by Courier Express a trunk carriage charge for each time a print goes to the provinces.

War Film opens to dismissive critical reaction, but the advertising campaign seems to work. It takes £23,000 in its first week, tails off towards the end of the eight week run, but nets in all £80,000. Your share of the takings is £22,400, which almost covers necessary initial expenses, but has not yet dented your original advance payment for distribution rights, nor contributed to release print costs. You have thirty Rank

cinemas opening the film, mainly in London. These bookings are on a 'sliding scale with break figures' in each case. For example: distributor to receive 50% of net box-office takings per week; if the net box-office takings are below £5,000 distributor will receive 45%. If below £4,000, 40%; £3,000, 35%; £2,000, 30%; £1,000, 25%.

The 'break figure' varies and is determined by seating capacity, cinema expenses, number of performances etc. Circuit booking terms are, generally speaking, not negotiable by distributors, merely acceptable or unacceptable.

For *War Film*, you spend another £20,000 on TV advertising, and it does reasonable business: which means that Rank do not suddenly decide not to play it anywhere else, but start to give you dates at another 80 of their cinemas. You can confidently expect to make a personal net profit over three years of between £60,000 and £1,000,000. Alternatively, *War Film*, despite your spending on more TV advertising, does not do the expected business – which would have to be a combined net box-office take at the thirty theatres of £250,000 to return to you as distributor, at 25% rental, sufficient to recoup your cash investment. Because business on London release is poor, Rank are reluctant to honour their booking commitments in the rest of the country. This means that you will be buying a lot of lunches and generally trying to squeeze odd bookings out of both Rank and other circuits or independents while still wondering where you went wrong.

However, you still have *Exploitation Film*. It has no big stars, but could appeal to student audiences, because it is very like the John Carpenter films, and full of action, suspense, violence and easily deletable sex; ideal for the *Halloween* and *Assault on Precinct 13* market, which

42 – after cool reaction to the films from circuits at first – is a considerable one. For double bill release with it in the provinces you have been to Cannes and picked up a Kung Fu film for \$4,000 outright – plus print costs. *Exploitation Film* itself has cost you \$10,000 (it's a very cheap exploitation film) for the UK and prints will be ordered individually at £500 plus freight and customs duty at £150. As *Exploitation Film* is not primarily a sexploitation film, the only West End cinema appropriate for it is the Classic, Charing Cross Road. Another possibility in London is the Screen on the Green. The options are mutually exclusive in first run terms, as each would confer on the film a particular identity in the trade (Screen on the Green being paired with an 'art/cult' product), which would only be irrelevant to subsequent booking activity if Screen on the Green took a great deal of money with the film. From the point of view of revenue considerations, both these cinemas book films on 'normal' terms, ie a sliding scale: there is no 'house figure' to worry about, and incidental publicity is probably not to be greater than £3,000 over a month's run.

While awaiting confirmation that the programme is acceptable to either, you will order three prints of each film, arrange censorship and registration with the Films Branch of the Department of Trade and Industry and send the films round to EMI and possibly Rank for viewing. With much violence in each film, you have perhaps to shorten a couple of sequences which the two examiners allocated to the screening of the films at the offices of the British Board of Film Censors 'take exception to'. They write to you saying that only when the appropriate reels have been re-submitted to them 'marked-up' (ie with sufficient excisions) will the requested 'X' certifi-

cates be granted. You have an editor on contract, and decide that he should simply go ahead and make the cuts, liaising directly with the examiners, rather than get involved with the Board's secretary, appealing and haggling about 'artistic integrity'.

Violence which viewers could imitate particularly concerns the censors, and often the sections to which they take exception are, in terms of screen time, very short. However, as the cuts will be made in each positive print, and the soundtrack is printed twenty frames ahead of the picture, the deletion of a brief image is not always possible without further soundtrack deletions of screams, sickening thuds or whatever, which unfortunately are printed on the film against other perfectly acceptable images. Sex sequences with no sadistic under- or overtones are rare, but if the examiners should take exception to any, editing is comparatively easy, since they were probably filmed as insert sequences anyway. Editors working on distribution prints will usually take more care to try to make cuts as unnoticeable as possible, irrespective of the quality of the film – more care it would seem, than those working in independent television particularly (*Walking Tall* or *Chinatown* are two examples of films transmitted in mutilated form).

Assuming that you fail to secure an opening in London, you then establish that the circuit viewers' response to the double-bill was favourable; that is to say that they will book it, as and when there are odd available dates, in the smallest of their auditoria. You or your salesman visit every circuit booker, in person, at all their companies and try to pick up dates. You may decide to order more prints immediately if you collect a lot of bookings, or you may stall until some have played off: if they do well you will keep

all the bookings you in theory already have and add to them, so that you may finish up with a quasi-circuit deal. If the first playoffs are disappointing, you will have a struggle to keep in the rest. If you are very fortunate, the main film will 'cross the market' from routine exploiter to 'sleeper' . . . like *Seventeen*, *Emanuelle*, *Hallowe'en*, *Assault On Precinct 13* (the best example). Interestingly, the film could then come back for reconsideration for a London West End or key suburban run.

Your third release is *Art Film*: here you have big problems. The BBC have probably bought it direct from the producers and you are not sure when they intend screening – they might tell you if you ask nicely. As it is not a new film, and you do not yourself own a London cinema, you must immediately make arrangements for its long-term selling, ie 16mm non-theatrical distribution. Outside London, as mentioned earlier, there are only a handful of cinemas, most of which have limited box-office earning potential, which can be expected to play the film. Your costs have been in the region of £7,000, that is, rights: £5,000; print: £1,000; subtitling: £1,000. A deal for 16mm distribution may return some advance money immediately, but this is not automatic. The 16mm distributor also has problems of reduction prints costs, promotion and publicity, and may offer you a larger share of subsequent non-theatrical revenues in return for no advance payments. Artificial Eye and Cinegate, thanks to an effective blend of shrewd judgement, luck, and professionalism, have within the last few years established themselves, with Contemporary Films, as the chief importers and distributors of foreign films. It is notable that, because of the high costs of distribution and despite the box-office success

of many of their films, it has proved essential for them to operate their own cinemas; the bulk of their post-London revenue is earned by 16mm distribution. Increasingly, the BBC is becoming an importer of foreign films, buying up not only television rights but also full theatrical distribution rights. The trade restrictions on television screening of new films have been largely concerned with the English language product – the time limit is now only three years from the date of opening. For some time, therefore, there has been an agreement between small distributors and the CEA and SFD that subtitled films which are thought to have little commercial potential outside London could be screened on television almost immediately after their London screening. This has happened with *The Watchmaker Of Saint Paul*, *Illustrious Corpses* and many others. This attitude of the distributors which implicitly ignores the existence of the Regional Film Theatres and other independent cinemas, has been determined by exclusively economic considerations. In effect what happens is that the BBC puts up the money for the rights, subtitling etc, and subleases the film for limited periods of time to established distributors like Cinegate. The distributor may or may not have contributed to the purchase price.

As a distributor without a West End cinema, and not having been able to purchase the television rights yourself, you have to find a suitable cinema for *Art Film*; you will probably end up with a maximum of three weeks at the ICA or the Ritzy, Brixton; perhaps even the Everyman or Electric Cinema – all these could return a reasonable amount of revenue, with little attendant publicity expenditure, and by opening in London you get the necessary press reviews which

44 (if favourable!) increase considerably the chances of bookings outside London. You might approach the BFI with a view to obtaining a guaranteed number of bookings at Regional Film Theatres and allied Consortium⁴ venues; the BFI could possibly advance money for the purchase of an extra print and also a negotiated sum to be paid immediately against percentage earnings at the theatres; in return, you will have to book the film through the BFI to the theatres at reduced percentage terms, and for as long or small playing times as they themselves determine. Realistically, during the probable three years of your agreement

you cannot expect to net more than £2,000 from these bookings, nor will you be able to take, or authorise your 16mm agent to take any bookings at schools, film societies and other non-theatrical situations within a two mile radius of any Consortium theatre prior to a booking at the latter.

You are now looking for more films to distribute – or another job!

4 The RFT's have recently joined with other independent cinemas and the BFI to form a Regional Consortium as a means of coordinating film distribution and booking.

THEATRE

Série créée en 1949. Bimensuel, 20 numéros par an. L'exemplaire : 15 F. (Etranger 18 F). Format 18 x 27. 1000 pièces publiées. Prix « Plaisir du Théâtre 1976 ». Chaque numéro contient : une pièce en trois actes de l'actualité de Paris ou de province, une pièce en un acte ou une fiche technique et une chronique de l'actualité théâtrale. Nombreuses photos.

Abonnement 1 an 20 numéros : 185 F (Etranger 225 F)
Couplé avec Cinéma 1 an 40 numéros : 355 F (Etr. 425 F)

CINEMA

Série créée en 1961. Bimensuel, 20 numéros par an. L'exemplaire : 15 F. (Etranger 18 F) Format 18 x 27. 400 films publiés. « Lion de Saint Marc » au Festival de Venise en 1965 et 1967. Chaque numéro contient : un long métrage : dialogues in extenso et découpage, plan à plan, un supplément : « Cinémathèque » : courts métrages, dossiers, archives, ou « Anthologie » : études consacrées aux « Grands » du cinéma. Nombreuses photos.

Abonnement 1 an 20 numéros : 189 F (Etranger 229 F)
Couplé avec Théâtre 1 an 40 numéros : 355 F (Etr. 425 F)

OPÉRA

Série créée en 1976. Bimestriel, 6 numéros par an. L'exemplaire : 28 F. (Etranger 32 F.) Format 18 x 27. Chaque numéro contient : le texte intégral bilingue d'un opéra avec études, un commentaire musical et littéraire, l'œuvre à l'affiche, discographie, bibliographie et iconographie très complète. Nombreuses photos.

Abonnement 1 an 6 numéros : 139 F (Etranger 194 F)

BALLET DANSE

Nouvelle revue. 4 numéros par an. L'exemplaire : 45 F. (Etranger 49 F). Format 18 x 27. Chaque numéro contient l'analyse intégrale d'un ballet du répertoire classique romantique ou contemporain, avec un commentaire musical, littéraire, chorégraphique, scénographique, historique. Une discographie et une bibliographie de référence, une très importante iconographie.

Abonnement 1 an 4 numéros : 140 F (Etranger 156 F)



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OPPOSITIONAL EXHIBITION

NOTES AND PROBLEMS

FOR SOME YEARS now, in conjunction with the development of practices of production and distribution in opposition to those associated with mainstream commercial cinema, and in conjunction with the appearance of oppositional critical and theoretical work on film, various and diverse attempts have been and are being made to develop progressive, oppositional practices of film exhibition. The variety and diversity stem not only from the constant need to experiment, but also from the nature of the constellation of institutions and discourses involved in each of the projects — be they Regional Film Theatres receiving a subsidy from the British Film Institute, commercial repertory cinemas, small regional ventures funded by Regional Arts Associations, projects based largely on workshop production, or projects with a specific ethnic, cultural or political base. What I want to do in this article is outline some of the issues, problems and practices that have arisen in attempts to develop such alternatives, especially in relation to projects with cinema auditoria (as opposed to projects which involve travelling round with films to political meetings or educational events), and especially as they relate to issues of audience, film culture and politics.

Operating on a strictly commercial basis within a capitalist economy, the mainstream film industry is, of necessity, tied to conceiving, producing, distributing and exhibiting its products within the limits imposed by the commodity form. All of its practices are geared to dealing with its products as commodities, and to negotiating the contradictions and problems that arise as a consequence of the specificity of its product on the one hand and

introduction

the mainstream
film industry

the demands of the commodity form on the other. These contradictions and problems, as is well known, include the combined necessity for novelty, individuality and formulaic repetition; the fact that the product itself exists in the process of exchange only in the interaction between the consumer and a particular articulation of meaning and pleasure; the fact that what the consumer purchases is less an object for possession and use than the right to an experience and its memories; and the fact that the generation of demand depends almost solely upon the production and perpetuation of specific forms of signification, pleasure and desire.

The consequences of these contradictions, problems and necessities *vis-à-vis* practices and modes of exhibition are also well known. Films are produced and marketed in order to gain a mass audience and, hence, the maximum possible return upon capital invested in production and distribution. Consequently, the history of film has, in a sense, been the history of the ways in which the cinema has attempted commercially to produce and maintain that audience while at the same time negotiating the contradictions involved in crossing and entertaining the distinct instances that the term 'audience' both indicates and tends to elide: *population*, as the sum of individuals and groups constituting, across the social formation, the field from which specific audiences are drawn; *spectator*, as the individual insofar as she or he is viewing a film; *subject*, as the psychic structures and processes constituting the field of individuality; and *audience* itself, as simultaneously the collection of individuals inhabiting the cinema auditorium at any one screening, the potential sector of the population to whom any one film or group of films is or can be addressed, and the actual sector of the population attending that film or those films.

It would seem that cinema appealed initially to a largely proletarian sector of the population. The appeal was inscribed in the discursive field from which its plots and stories derived, in the elements and strategies borrowed from music-hall, vaudeville and popular theatre, and in the nature and location of its sites of exhibition (penny arcades, music-hall and vaudeville theatres, the nickleodeon, and so on). Subsequently there followed a period of appeal to the bourgeoisie via the inscription of production values, of novelistic discursive strategies and of references to bourgeois culture which coincided with the building of cinemas and 'picture palaces' modelled upon theatres and opera halls. During the period of the studio system in Hollywood there was probably as close

a conjunction as there has ever been between a mode of textual address designed to unite rather than divide its audiences and a set of institutional practices designed to maximise the appeal of cinema across as wide a sector of the population nationally and internationally as was possible. This is not to say that the appeal of Hollywood was universal, nor that it considered either the population as a whole or the audiences within it as completely monolithic. It consistently, even during this period, both recognised and produced divisions and discriminations within and across the population — through the production of a range of genres, through the articulation of its films with the classifications imposed by systems of censorship, through the inscription of 'points of appeal' addressed, for example, to what it conceived as male spectators, on the one hand, and female spectators on the other. Even so, the appeal of cinema, as a whole, was inscribed as far as possible across the divisions constituting society and its population, while its mode of textual address was designed to homogenise, as it were, the spectating subject, the audience and the population. The only limitations on the latter were those constituted by the divisions constructed around the inscription and specification of the Law and those constituted across the globe by situations of war, foreign policy and so on. The aim was to contain rather than to exacerbate contradiction.

The same is true today, when mainstream cinema seems more than ever willing to differentiate its product across categories of age, sex, culture and class. Despite important stylistic modifications, and the production, on occasion, of a very particular pleasure across hesitations in the narrative process and in the establishment of re-marking between the registers of sound and vision, the basic mode of address remains that of an appeal to a mass audience constituted in terms of spectacle, identification and entertainment.

commercial
exhibition today

A second important feature of the industry's positioning of its products is that each one is sold, marketed and exhibited individually — each film is conceived and viewed as a single, self-contained entity. The industry has, of course, to rely upon the fact that connections do exist between films and that there already exists at a general social level a knowledge and a memory of its conventions and pleasures — hence a knowledge and a memory of other films. The former, however, are contained and articulated in terms of stars, genres, authors and cycles, while the latter tends to receive undifferentiated definition as the nature of cinema itself.

- 1 See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1974.

conditions of
viewing

The films, meanwhile, contain their intertextuality in terms of a cultural code¹ derived from the social field of 'common knowledge', 'common sense', and in terms of a mode of narration that states and generates internally all the knowledge needed for its comprehension, closing off its strands and enigmas in a process marked as self-contained, as complete at its own point of closure.

Moving from the level of exhibition as it relates to the general mechanisms of discursive strategy and social circulation across the instances of the audience, there are important points to be made about exhibition as it involves and depends upon specific conditions of viewing. Since the early part of this century, for example, the viewing of films has taken place in cinemas, in sites built specifically for the projection and viewing of films. The existence of such specialised sites seems clearly related to the general process in which cinema came to differentiate itself from other cultural and aesthetic processes and practices, establishing its own specific cultural and aesthetic presence and its own specific sector of the market. Simultaneously, they functioned to separate cinema from other social practices, and films and their discourses from other discourses and other forms of their institutionalisation and articulation. Meanwhile, and just as important, account should be taken of the determinations exercised upon viewing and consumption by the design and layout of the cinema auditorium as it has come to be institutionalised and embodied in cinemas as we know them — be they plush London premier houses, local Odeons or Classics, local Regional Film Theatres, the Scala, the Electric, the National Film Theatre, the ICA cinema or whatever. With the screen situated on one wall of the auditorium (generally masked by curtaining — as if the image, when it appears, is potentially extendable in any direction, as if the curtaining could be pulled back to reveal more and more of a continuous and homogeneous visual field); with the projection box situated (and hidden) behind the wall opposite; and with the audience in between, the set-up is designed both to conceal the mechanisms of projection and to minimise distraction. The senses and their attention are thus solicited and intensified, open to engagement and amplification. The audience as a whole is encouraged not only by the mode of film being watched, but also by the conditions in which that watching takes place, to identify with the spectacle taking place and with the aural and scopic drives that the spectacle involves and entertains.

One might schematically sum up the features of commercial

exhibition noted above as characterised by the generation, perpetuation and legitimation of the consumption of films as individual entities to be viewed in terms of spectacle and identification. Under these conditions, the 'success' of any particular film becomes almost totally dependent upon a balance of novelty and repetition (not too similar to other films, not too different), upon the fact that it is intelligible on its own terms (that it acknowledges no gaps or absences in the discourses and structures it involves), and, finally, upon its ability to engage and to entertain pleasurably the drives and processes that identification and spectacle entail.

Oppositional practices of exhibition seek in various ways to challenge each of the characteristics, structures and practices marking mainstream cinematic exhibition as outlined above. In summary form, these oppositional practices work in some or in all the following ways, adopting some or all of the following strategies: programming films into seasons structured around social, political and/or cinematic issues (the family, racism, feminism, the politics of the avant-garde, genre, the work of specific directors and film-makers, the representation of history, and so on); using documentation: booklets, and programme notes; programming lectures, discussions and courses; juxtaposing, within any one season, different forms and modes of cinema; finally, but crucially, screening on a regular basis independent films from various local, national and international contexts. I would like to elaborate upon some of these practices and to describe some of the problems and contradictions they tend to involve.

The notion of the season, while it tends to be unheard of in the industry as such, is nevertheless fairly firmly established in the areas of commercial and cultural practice that have come to be designated collectively as 'Art cinema'. Many Regional Film Theatres put on seasons of films. The National Film Theatre programmes in seasons. Even the Academy in London has from time to time mounted a regular programme of Buster Keaton's work. The difference between venues and practices such as these and the practices of some of the more adventurous Regional Film Theatres, of a number of small, local independent venues, of the ICA and of some of the London repertory cinemas like the Electric and the Scala lies in the nature and conception of the season, and in the way in which it is structured. An obvious and immediate difference consists in the fact that the former will tend to mount seasons on the work of a director or of a 'National Cinema', while

oppositional
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the latter will have seasons on feminist cinema, imperialism, childhood, the family and so on. The real issue, however, is not, in my view, one of 'social issues' versus 'auteurism', at least not immediately. All of these categories can be used to homogenise the films grouped within them, and, hence, the positions available to an audience. And if the former simply remains within and reinforces an unproblematised conception of 'cinema', the latter can equally remain within and reinforce an unproblematised notion of what constitutes 'social issues' and of what constitutes a progressive politics and its theory. There is at least likely to be some sense in the latter, however, both of a social conjuncture existing outside the cinema, and hence, of specific audiences on the one hand and of intervention and strategy on the other. It is these that are important, though it should be stressed that they can be found in cinemas operating within a specific field of cinema and film culture. Cinemas like the Scala and the Electric demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to centre programming strategies around cinema and its auteurs and genres without necessarily losing a sense of cultural politics, simply because they seek to promote particular forms of cinematic pleasure over others. This is not to argue that in these cases in particular the strategy is unambiguous (replacing a taste for Art films with a taste for B movies, horror films and *films noir* is an extremely ambivalent cultural strategy), but there is at least some form of identifiable and arguable *politique* and hence the problem of collapsing all cinema together as if it was all equally worthy of the same attention is avoided.

It is not, then, a matter of privileging politics or society, as conventionally understood, over cinema or film culture. It is rather a matter, in my opinion, of posing questions as to the relationships between them, hence of shifting and challenging the positions currently and conventionally available in relation to each of these instances.

The rationale behind the practice of programming in structured seasons, then, is that it articulates a set of relations between each of the individual films within a programme, making links and comparisons while opening up contrasts and differences within a context that is specifically and explicitly defined and articulated. Where a general social issue like that of 'the family' is the focus of a season (the importance of that issue arising perhaps from the social conjuncture as a whole or from the impact of a new film or films), a season can thus be used to highlight the different

ways in which that issue articulates with the cinema, and just as importantly, the different ways in which distinct forms of cinematic representation structure the issue itself, and positions in relationship to it. What is particularly interesting about 'the family' in this context is that it forms not only the signified subject matter of many films, new and old, but also firstly, that it is itself used by the cinematic institution to define a category of audience and a mode of viewing ('family entertainment'); secondly, that it forms the basis of a whole genre (melodrama); thirdly, that it forms the context of modes of film-making outside the field of commercial cinema itself ('home movies', some of the more personally oriented films of filmmakers like Brakhage), and fourthly that through the Oedipus complex it offers the means both of structuring the forms of narrative and plot and of structuring the relations of the spectating subject to them. Similarly, particularly in situations like those of Regional Film Theatres, where the basis of the operation lies largely in the regular programming of new releases from the spheres of Art cinema, it is possible to mount seasons which create various contexts, both cinematic and non-cinematic, for each of the films in question. It is also possible both to demonstrate a film's textual affiliations and in certain instances to transform its status and significance in doing so. A film like *Eraserhead*, for example, has tended to circulate either as something which is obscurely unique, without a context or a tradition, or else as an example of an ill-defined cinema of 'surrealism', 'poetry' and 'fantasy', evoked through names like Cocteau, Buñuel and Dali, Polanski and Skolimowski. Certainly there is a context here, but it is not simply one of apparently dream-like textual strategies. It is also one of the nature of the fantasies involved. Like *Orphée*, *Cul de Sac*, *Repulsion*, *The Tenant* and *Deep End*, *Eraserhead* is profoundly misogynistic, both depending upon and generating a fetishistic terror of women and, in the case of *Eraserhead*, of the female body in particular. A further link with these themes is provided by *film noir*, which shares with *Eraserhead* an extreme *chiaroscuro* lighting, and which crosses with them, significantly, in the instance of Polanski's *Chinatown*. Programming *Eraserhead* in these contexts, and in conjunction, perhaps, with a number of feminist films, would enable not only a recognition of the way in which the film operates but would go some way towards changing its status as an instant poetic classic and towards changing the status of the poetic tradition itself, opening it up to an examination of the meanings it pro-

duces, the fantasies it involves, the ideologies it constructs, and the social contradictions it negotiates.

A final but very important feature of structured programming is that it provides a means by which to counteract the apparent arbitrariness of the operations of the industry and its market, just as it also provides a means with which to challenge the industry's stress on the individual product as something to be experienced in and for itself. Where what appears each week in the commercial cinemas appears to have no rationale, the idea of the season allows a degree of intervention at an explicitly argued and stated level — this film or this group of films is being shown for this particular reason. The process of cinema, the divisions and categories that it predominantly involves, and the way in which the individual film in the apparent arbitrariness of its appearances meshes into that process through a mechanism of confirmation and renewal (the pleasures of cinema renewed and restated across the specific articulation they receive in each new film) can be challenged. Another form of that process can be proposed and the relations between viewer, film and context modified to a certain extent.

Given that the structured programming of films is, or rather can be, an attempt to intervene into the relations between films and into the articulation of contexts for them, and given that such interventions are designed to work against the relations and contexts that are determined both by the industry and by the discourses circulating in press and television journalism, it is evident that the use of documentation, speakers and discussions is crucial to the aims and processes of programming. It is crucial because these practices allow the statement of a rationale behind a season, the articulation and circulation of readings of the films that differ from those provided by mainstream journalism, thus the circulation of a wider series of positions from which to view the films than would normally be possible, the statement of a linking of the films under a rubric, which simultaneously provides the basis for their subsequent differentiation, and last, but not least, the provision of a space in which the voices of viewers (as well as the voice(s) of the films) can be heard and in which they can engage in debate and the exchange and potential transformation of positions.

As most film programmers will know, there can be no guarantee that seasons will be attended as seasons, that the films will be viewed or read in the manner a season proposes. People will still

go to see films on an individual basis and bring with them their own cultural concerns, positions and modes of reading. This, of course, is hardly surprising, but not simply because seasons and the readings that accompany them exist in opposition to the socially predominant modes and practices of cinema. It would be utopian indeed to expect any season — let alone any film — to effect a uniform transformation (or confirmation) of the positions occupied by members of an audience. Audiences are heterogeneous. Any form of homogeneity in terms of meaning, pleasure and position is therefore by definition impossible. Instead, the strategy behind these practices is — or should be — a different one. In confronting an audience with a programme of films containing unusual combinations and juxtapositions of individual films and modes of film-making, in thus asking that audience or public actively to select (and reject), and in setting a context for such selections, a process is set in motion which differs from that taking place in mainstream exhibition, in that decisions are made *vis-à-vis* a context which is articulated, stated and argued. The process is thus one in which differences and contradictions are stressed and highlighted and in which positions in relation to cinema are foregrounded and problematised.

Some of the problems of programming arise also in relation to the provision of documentation. It can remain unread or be rejected. It can also simply become an adjunct to a process of spectacle and identification. The argument here, I think, is a similar one to that made in relation to programming itself: documentation allows the articulation of a context or set of contexts in relation to which choices can be made and positions defined and problematised. For this reason I think also that the nature and mode of documentation is important. One could simply provide a single sheet of notes for each film. But, even if such notes were to contain important and challenging theoretical or critical points, they would work against the articulation of a context of the showing of a film within an overall season and they would tend, unless a plurality of positions and readings were involved, simply to reinforce, either positively or negatively, the position occupied already by any specific spectator. This plurality is crucial, because it actively recognises both the heterogeneity of the films and the heterogeneity of the audience. Such heterogeneities are prevented from becoming eclectic through the provision of a context. It is in relation to this context that, in any one instance, positions and readings are elaborated — thus becoming

documentation

positions and readings rather than monolithic or relativistic statements of meaning and truth.

discussion

Speakers and the programming of discussions function in a similar way, providing another mode for the articulation of positions, another space in which they can be stated, exchanged and transformed. The use of speakers and discussions brings programming strategies which involve them close in appearance and operation to the strategies of formal education. Screenings, lectures and discussions in the former context are, however, attended on a very different basis from courses in institutions of education: an educational audience is *provided* with a film, discussion, lecture or whatever, rather than wanting to see it, participate in it or listen to it. The context is different in both cases and the former, I would argue, can be more open to a politics than the latter, both because the status of politics in an educational context is very different from its status outside that context, and because the status of the desires and wants of the audience is different also. If the advantage of an educational context in its strict sense is that issues and positions can be posed, problematised and discussed across a span of time by a stable group of participants, the advantage of a non-educational context is that the heterogeneity of an audience can of itself ensure that a variety of concerns and positions will be brought together, articulated and debated and that the status of a lecture or discussion can more readily be lent a political character.

programming independent work

I'd like at this point to say something about the programming of independent work which takes as its aim the challenging of those relations of spectating inscribed into the textual strategies and practices of mainstream cinema, and to situate it in relation to the determinations exercised on viewing by the nature and design of conventional cinema auditoria. Much of this work seeks to unsettle its audiences, to challenge the pleasures of spectacle and identification and to problematise forms of knowledge and position. To that extent it works to alienate, to generate a level of anxiety. Anxiety will inevitably occur when positions are threatened and destabilised, when the subject is confronted by the insistence of loss. Hence some of the common reactions it tends to generate: boredom, irritation, laughter, and a general defensiveness. Alienation and anxiety become amplified, however, when the films are viewed in conditions designed solely for identification and spectacle. And in certain instances this can hinder the functioning of the films themselves. The structural avant-garde tends to suffer. But so also do films which work much more closely

with traces of characterisation, narrative and plot — *In the Forest*, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, *The Song of the Shirt*, *Because I am King*, *Justine*, *Blackbird Descending* and so on.

There are important issues here concerning the criteria to be used in measuring the 'success' of a screening. But there is also an issue for film-makers concerning the extent to which they recognise conventional screening conditions as a context for their work. Paul Willemen has argued that all films depend upon the existence of the scopophilic drive.² The intensity of the desire for visual pleasure which it embodies is considerably amplified in conventional cinemas. A number of the films I have mentioned seek to come to terms with this by engaging visual fascination directly, not in order to afford it conventional satisfaction but in order to render such satisfaction problematic. *The Song of the Shirt*, for example, engages the look through its play with mirror-like surfaces, drawing on the fascination they engender in order to problematise the 'realism' and 'depth' conventionally accorded visual representation: the surface has nothing behind it. *Riddles of the Sphinx* engages the look through its colour, depth of field and use of camera movement. But it does so in order to refuse the scopic drive any conventional form of punctual satisfaction, insisting, instead, on the rhythms of repetition it embodies. And so on. Other films, however, seem to wish to refuse visual pleasure and scopophilia altogether. And these become much more 'difficult' when viewed in a conventional auditorium. The issue partly lies in the extent to which there is a necessity for a degree of 'tolerance' in viewing a film, partly in how the design of an auditorium can affect this by inscribing a specific set of desires and demands, and partly in how a film can then interact *productively* with them.

One final practice I would like to indicate is that of involving audiences and groups in programming itself, as part of a strategy designed both to transform the relations between audiences and films and to establish a specific identity and credibility for a cinema and its programming. There are, of course, numerous pitfalls and difficulties here. They centre around two dangers, opportunism and tokenism on the one hand and that of becoming a neutral, technical service on the other. With the former, it is all too easy to address a particular film or season to a specific group or to involve that group in the formation of a programme only then to revert to more traditional practices where the programme originates solely from the cinema itself. With the latter, any form of intervention by the cinema itself is eschewed, allowing the

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2 Paul Willemen, 'Voyeurism, the Look and Dwoskin', *Afterimage*, no 6, Summer 1976.

audience
participation in
programming

programming group simply re-state and maintain their position in relation to film and the cinema itself to remain comfortably outside a process of engagement and debate at the programming level. A balance, clearly needs to be struck, so that programming becomes a genuine site of debate and potential transformation, and so that the programme itself serves to problematise rather than to re-inforce existing positions and practices. There is no doubt, however, that programming of this kind can be a very important way of engaging in the transformation of the relations sustained by mainstream cinema and by the culture that supports it. If the appearance of individual films in the local Odeon can seem piecemeal and arbitrary at a cultural level, so too can individual programmes of films. The involvement of audiences, actual and potential, can at least serve to anchor locally the motivation that any one season or film may have.

This article is an elaboration of a paper given at a conference on British Independent Cinema in the '80s, held at Cinema City in Norwich and organised by *Framework* magazine.

Most of the points I have made and most of the practices I have described will be very familiar to those working in the field of oppositional exhibition. They do not, however, represent the final resolution of its problems and it is for this very reason that it is important that the debate about this area of cinematic practice continues.

METHUEN

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ARTISTS MYTHOLOGIES AND MEDIA GENIUS, MADNESS AND ART HISTORY

IN THE GROWING marxist literature on the history of art considerable attention has been paid to the defaults of current art history: the failure of that discipline which purports to provide a *history* of art, to engage with, or even acknowledge, any but the most simplistic, recognisable notion of history let alone of production, class or ideology. Crucial questions have not been posed about *how* art history works to exclude from its fields of discourse history, class, ideology, to produce an ideological, 'pure' space for something called 'art', sealed off from and impenetrable to any attempt to locate art practice within a history of production and social relations. The absence of such work is critical on many accounts. It is a major impediment to radical practices within and on art history – for without an analysis of the ideologies of art history, radical studies of artistic production have no effect as an intervention. They can be represented by the art historical establishment as a marginal alternative dismissed as an unwarrantable extension of other academic disciplines, such as sociology, or as political ideologies, which are considered extrinsic to art history's 'proper' concerns. Above all, they are rejected as self-evidently anti-'art'. Without identifying the effects of art-historical ideologies as guarantees of dominant notions of art and the artist, the different kind of work on the history of this area of cultural production is prevented from having any effect on art history and other areas of cultural analysis and practice. That specific area of cultural production known as the history of art is marginalised. It is either dismissed by leftist populism as an elitist extension of

high culture or is simply unexamined through ignorance of either art history or its effects. Furthermore, when some attempts are made to reclaim art for history, they tend to occur within a liberal ideology of art as document of social history. This article is primarily an account of the dominance of the ideologies of art history across a wide and extended field of cultural discourse, sites of cultural consumption and areas of cultural practice. In this article I shall concentrate on the central constructions of art and the artist produced by art history and secured by its hegemonic role throughout this network. The prime area of attention is the figure of the artist. In 1949, the marxist art historian Frederick Antal wrote a paper 'Remarks on the Method of Art History'. He considered the historical development of the discipline and the various tendencies within different schools of art history which had emerged since the late nineteenth century. He concluded the survey, which is still pertinent, with the following observations:

Although lately it has become fashionable to introduce a few historical facts, these may only enter the art historical picture when confined to hackneyed political history, in a diluted form, which gives as little indication as possible of the existing structure of society and does not disturb the romantic twilight of the atmosphere. The last redoubt which will be held as long as possible is, of course, the most deep-rooted nineteenth century belief . . . of the incalculable nature of genius in art.¹

This core, against which all attempts to investigate modes and systems of representation and historical conditions of production (ie a social history of art) break, is signified by the most typical discursive forms of art historical research and writing – the monograph (a study of the artist's life and work), and the *catalogue raisonné* (the collection of the complete *oeuvre* of the artist whose coherence as an individual creator is produced by assembling all of his or (rarely) her work in an expressive totality). But there is more to this than collecting diverse fragments in order to unite them by a designated author, a category problematised and analysed by Foucault and taken up in recent debates in *Screen*.² The preoccupation with the individual artist is symptomatic of the work accomplished in art history – the production of an *artistic subject for works of art*. The subject constructed from the art work is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning – ie, of 'art', and the effect of this is to remove 'art' from historical or textual analysis by representing it solely as the 'expression' of the creative

1 F Antal, 'Remarks on the Method of Art History', reprinted in F Antal, *Essays in Romanticism and Classicism*, London 1966.

2 Foucault 'What is an author?' and S Clayton and J Curling 'On Authorship' *Screen* vol 20, no 1, 1979.

personality of the artist. Art is therefore neither public, social, nor a product of work. Art and the artist become reflexive, mystically bound into an unbreakable circuit which produces the artist as the subject of the art work and the art work as the means of contemplative access to that subject's 'transcendent' and creative subjectivity. The construction of an artistic subject for art is accomplished through current discursive structures – the *biographic*, which focuses exclusively on the individual, and the *narrative*, which produces coherent, linear, causal sequences through which an artistic subject is realised. I think it is useful to apply some of these categories of the analysis of narrative to the writing of art history, which not only narrates certain events but constitutes them as a narrative, subjected to a teleological impulse, while also enjoining 'narrativity' from the reader by the presentation of the events narrated in the coherence within the orders of temporality and causality. Art history can be therefore designated as a *literature* rather than a history or a historical discourse.

The material for my argument comes from a detailed case-study of a nineteenth century Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh (also cited as VG³), who occupies a special place in both art history and 'general knowledge'. VG is the well-known and popular artist. No other Western European painter is so universally familiar. More reproductions are sold of his work than any other artist of any country, school or period. Exhibitions of his work draw large crowds throughout the world from New York to Korea. He is the subject of innumerable books, films (like *Lust for Life* (1956)), novels, television documentaries and so on. A large museum is now dedicated to VG – the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh in Amsterdam – and displays a permanent exhibition of his paintings and drawings while also selling books, postcards, calendars, slides and other memorabilia to tourists from all over the world. VG reproductions adorn school corridors and dentists' waiting rooms. An exhibition in 1979 at a museum in Groningen in the Netherlands documented a movement in the 1940s and 1950s for the improvement and modernisation of taste and decoration in working class homes. Reproductions of VG's paintings were conspicuous on the walls of these model homes.

This exceptional status and degree of popular knowledge can be relied upon as mediation between these publics and 'art' in general. For instance the title of a touring exhibition sent in 1979 by the Dutch Government to Japan and the Far East was packaged as *Dutch painting in the Century of Van Gogh*. On 14 November 1979,

³ I have called the artist either VG or Van Gogh, switching between the two, rather arbitrarily. I am aware, but as an attempt to distance myself from the artist, of whom it is the custom amongst VG scholars to speak in the familiar, Vincent. (He signed himself as Vincent, in part because his name is unpronounceable in any other language than Dutch, and in part in honour of the seventeenth century portraitist of the civic bourgeoisie with whom he intended to be compared, who also used only his forename, Rembrandt van Rijn.) In my article paintings are referred to with their *F* numbers – these are for easy reference in the JB de La Faille *catalogue raisonné* (Amsterdam 1970). Letters are prefixed by *LT* (ie letter to Theo) or *W* (ie letter to Wilhemina) as numbered in the *Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, New York, 1959, originally written in Dutch or French.

a large and expensive exhibition of European painting from 1880-1905 entitled *Post-Impressionism* opened at the Royal Academy in London. One example of attendant publicity for this show was the cover of the *Observer* Colour Supplement which reproduced a portrait by Van Gogh and was captioned:

The Post Impressionists — William Feaver on a major new show of paintings by Van Gogh and other artists.

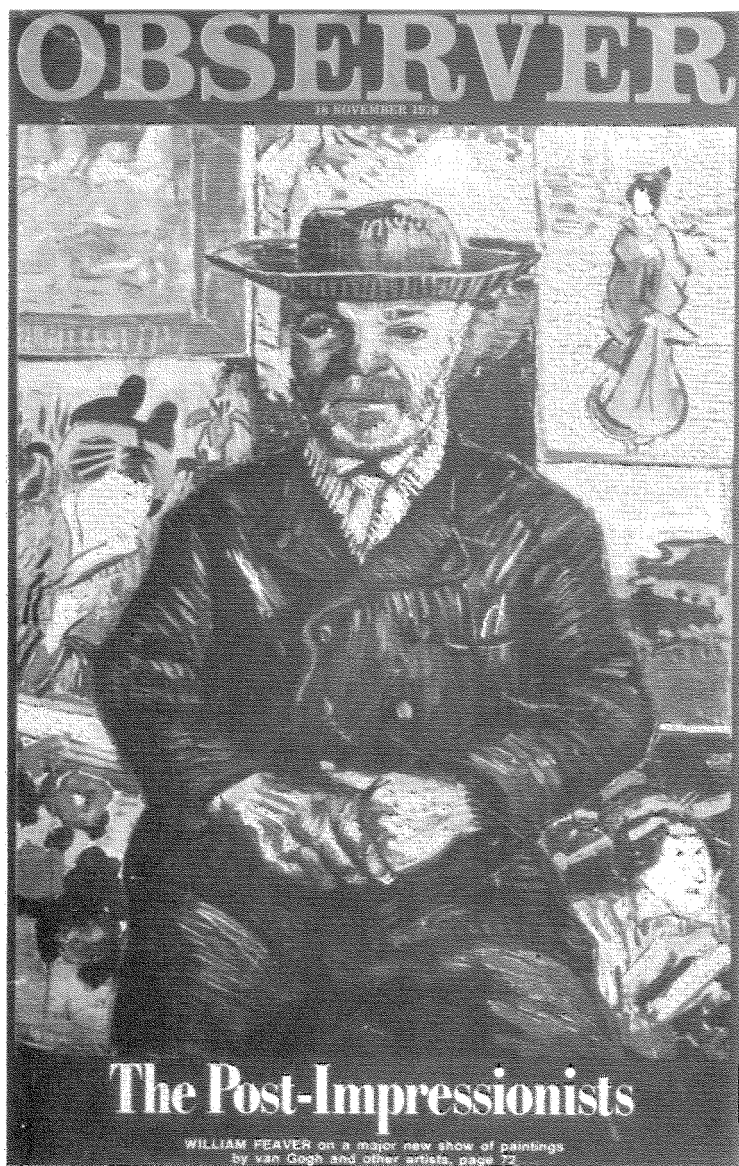
Post-Impressionism, the designation of a period of art practice, is personalised and individualised as a group of artists, the Post-Impressionists. But it was the name Van Gogh, the artist represented by a characteristically accessible and humanist portrait, that was used as the publicity draw. This 'popularity', this status evidenced by the use of 'Van Gogh' as a signifier of artist, as a sign in an advertisement for an art exhibition, as the mediator between general publics and 'other artists', and indeed other art, present in this variety of sites and texts, indicates that 'Van Gogh' has become a paradigm of the 'modern artist'.

Closer reading of the variety of texts through which this figure 'Van Gogh' is constructed produces a more complex signification. Around his life and work what appears to be a particular form of discourse has developed — a special way of discussing the artist and his works which is presented as if it were only a response to, a reflection of, his exceptional special individuality, his genius. By investigating the constitution of this special discourse in art historical literature, and in many other texts which address 'Van Gogh', it is possible to show the contrary. These modes which offer themselves as appropriate and singular approaches to a discrete individual are, in effect, the paradigmatic modes of art history's construction of the artistic subject, and the category of art.

Although this argument is based in part on moving out of the area of art historical discourse and tracing 'Van Gogh' across a number of texts and representations, the important effect of this mapping out of the readings of VG is that it returns us to art history, to its curatorial role in culture, producing and ensuring particular constructions of art and definitions of the artist.

This can best be examined by taking two examples from art historical texts in which two authors who occupy respected and influential positions within art history have addressed the issue of VG's popular status and appeal, Novotny and Hammacher. In 1953 the Viennese art-historian, Fritz Novotny, published a study on 'The Popularity of Van Gogh'⁴ in which he attempted to refute the

4 F Novotny 'Die Popularität van Goghs' *Alte und Neue Kunst* vol 2 no 2 1953, translated and reprinted in B Welsh — Ovcharov *Van Gogh in Perspective*, New Jersey, 1974. In future references to Novotny it is this translation and edition I shall cite.



idea that Van Gogh's renown was falsely based on a fascination with his unhappy life. Novotny's article opens by quoting a 1947 radio broadcast in which it was argued that VG's popularity was spurious. It resulted from the over-exploitation of the human interest of his biography, the dramatic events of his life, his suicide, 'sentimental factors' and 'curiosity about his abnormalities'. However, as I shall show, the apparent distance between the popularising and the art historical correctives which follow is little more than appearance. What is at stake is power, control

over what is said and how it is said in order to retrieve VG from popular humanism – ‘he was a bit odd but really he suffered just like the rest of us’ and to relocate him in that special sphere, art, the domain of art history.

In Novotny’s opinion, Van Gogh’s popularity was genuinely ‘a quite extraordinary phenomenon – great art becomes popular in the true sense’. For Novotny it was VG’s greatness as an artist and the accessibility of his art that produced VG’s widespread appeal. Novotny discounted his life or personality as pertinent to an understanding of VG’s art. He sought to explain why ‘Van Gogh’s art has proven approachable for an astonishingly great number of people’. A number of problems inherent in Novotny’s formulations are immediately apparent – his categories of great art and popular appeal, his notion of an absolute separation between the personality of the man and the character of the artist, his constant surprise that great art should attract a great number of people, as if there were no interests and institutions at work in the manufacture of the books, the organisation of the exhibitions, the production of broadcasts, and so on.

However, Novotny’s argument is not as radical a departure from the position he is criticising as it might at first appear. In the place of the psychobiographical overemphasis on Van Gogh’s life and personal misfortunes, he offers a reading of the paintings that is in fact profoundly psychobiographical. I use the term psychobiographical to characterise the psychological emphases which occur in both art historical and related literature on VG. These studies are not merely narrations of the events of VG’s life and work but psychological interpretations whose main drive is to discover the subjective ‘truth of the artist’.

Novotny constructs from the careful analysis of VG’s paintings and drawings an artistic subject, the personality of the painter. The distinction I perceive between Novotny and those he is criticising is one between the subjectivity of an individual expressing itself in painting and the subjectivity of a painter revealed through the paintings. The distinction may seem slight but the emphasis is crucial because what is at issue is the notion of an unhappy man who paints and, on the other hand, an artist into whose ‘artistness’ all other facets and circumstances of his living are subsumed. Novotny wrote in order to challenge the tendency to mistake Van Gogh’s *personal* biography for an artistic biography. And it is the production of that exclusively artistic subject that is the main project of art historical practice.

In place of, for example, Irving Stone's biography of a man who was an artist, *Lust for Life* (London 1935), the art historian produces the monograph which, while, in effect, not more than an *illustrated biography*, traces the life of a special kind of person, the artist, from life to death, within the narrow limits of only that which serves to render all that is narrated as signifiers of artistness. The monograph is paralleled by the *catalogue raisonné*, – the chronological ordering of the products of this 'artistness' through which can be reconstructed the linear development of an artistic biography. The *catalogue raisonné* also performs an economic function, for it is the main means by which art history services the art market through authentication, dating, and providing provenances ('pedigrees' of the painting's previous owners back to the moment it left the artist's workshop or studio), back to its creative origin. The economic value of a painting depends also on the status of its author. A painting by Rembrandt is more valuable than a work by a lesser known contemporary, primarily because a 'Rembrandt' has a documented place within an *oeuvre*, an *oeuvre* which has a subject – the 'Rembrandt' produced within the overlapping discourses of monograph and catalogue. It is easy to trace the correlation between the 'rediscovery' of a hitherto unknown artist, the production of a catalogue of all the known works by that artist, the publication of a monographic study and the rise and stabilisation of high prices for works by that artist on the art market.

The first *catalogue raisonné* of the work of VG was published in the 1920s, revised in the 1930s and re-edited and republished in a lavishly illustrated form in 1970. The introductory essay, by A M Hammacher, entitled *Van Gogh and the Words*, surveyed the main tendencies of Van Gogh literature since his death in 1890 to 1970. Hammacher also addressed the popular status of VG and asked:

*Do people go in crowds to queue at exhibitions out of love of the myth of painting and sculpture, out of love for a style, or is it, where Van Gogh is concerned, a popularity that is aroused via the intermediary of Lust for Life? Are the words, Vincent's and other men's words, unavoidable on the way to the paintings.*⁵

Such a passage raises further questions – it implies the possibility of a 'pure' response to and an unmediated experience of VG's paintings. Words, whether VG's or others, are seen as obstacles on the way to the paintings. Hammacher's text typifies

5 A Hammacher 'Van Gogh and the Words' in JB de La Faille and editors, *The Works of Vincent van Gogh – His Paintings and Drawings* (henceforward called the *Complete Works*), Amsterdam 1970.

an assumption which one encounters amongst artists, art students, art historians and in texts which pose themselves as 'radical' alternatives. Paintings are proffered as the repository of VG's meanings of and for himself, and the viewer is positioned as witness to him and his meanings, through direct visual or perceptual 'experience'.

In a subsequent passage, Hammacher expresses his pleasure at the spectacle of countless Japanese from the Emperor to shoeshine boys filing happily through the 1958 VG exhibition in Tokyo concluding 'One may safely forget the art slogans of "democracy" and "socialisation" [mistranslation for socialism I presume]' The genuine 'popularity' of VG is presented as having trans-class, trans-cultural accessibility. Bourgeois humanism – the category of man as a universal figure above and outside of class relations – is reproduced within the notion of art as the embodiment of an artistic subject which is available to direct perception. The multiplicity of readings of VG's paintings from different class and cultural positions are subsumed into a notion of his 'accessibility' sustained by the construction of art as a visual experience of a self exposed in paint on canvas.

It is here that we encounter the manoeuvres of art historical writing to secure the dominance of its discourses, its frames of reference, over all other words on art. The discipline lives by producing and selling its words – a *literature*; it disdains and seeks to displace all non-art-historically formulated words – like, for instance, Stone's fictional biography of VG. The regulated, institutionally trained, professional literature of art history uses its own words to produce a notion of art as ineffable, pristine, discrete – a non-verbal experience rooted in the difference of the artist, who is simultaneously distinct from other men and yet the epitome of universal man. It thus simultaneously separates art from social history and protects its own position as the privileged producer of a 'literature of art'.

If VG is produced as the paradigm of the artist, that place is supported by the assimilation of VG to another historical representation, the correspondence of 'madness' and 'art' – the myth of the mad genius. All aspects of VG's life story and the stylistic features of the work culminating in VG's self-mutilation and suicide has provided material to be reworked into a complex but familiar image of the madness of the artist – 'sensitive, tormented, yet incredibly brilliant' as an advertisement for a limited edition of gold medals struck with reproductions of VG's most famous paintings in a *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement aptly restated it.

The question presents itself: Why do we need VG as *mad genius*? This can best be considered by recognising that the notions of madness and art which produce the category 'mad genius' have little to do with clinical pathology or definitions of sanity, but circle around categories of difference, otherness, excess. They concern those special and distinct modes of being which set the artist ineffably apart. Some have argued that the madness attributed to the artist is a means of displacing the threat of rupture of discourse produced by artistic practices. I find this suspiciously romantic: it is already part of the myth of mad genius. For the present I want to suggest that the discourse on madness and art operates to sever art and artist from history and to render both unavailable to those without the specialised knowledge of its processes which art history claims for itself. The art historian, the trained professional, stands as the necessary mediator of art to the public: art historical words function as exegesis or translation; historical analysis is replaced by what Macherey designated as 'interpretative criticism'. This practice attempts to dismantle the art work or text to liberate and extract an immanent but singular meaning.

*Translation and reduction: focusing the apparent diversity of the work in a single signification. And: Thus we have posited the principles of an immanent criticism: the work encloses a meaning which must be released; the letter of the work is a mask, eloquent and deceptive which this meaning bears; a knowledge of the work is an ascent to this central unique meaning.*⁶

In terms of art history and tendencies to such interpretative criticism, the meaning extracted from an artistic text is that which produces as meaning an authorial subjectivity, the artist. The implication of genius and madness serves to secure that subjectivity as the revealed meaning of the work of art.

Art historical practice takes place within specific but diversified conditions of production – both the production of knowledge or definition for art, and the production of books and related commodities that purvey that knowledge. Van Gogh occupies a particular place in art publishing, not only in terms of large, expensive and weighty tomes, like the three volumes of his letters (often presented as diaries of an autobiography) translated and published in numerous languages, the *catalogue raisonné*, and the volumes of redatings of the letters and redating of the paintings with letter extracts, most of which cost in the region of £40-£50.

6 P Macherey. *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966). English translation, 1978.

All of these construct a linear, sequential narrative of VG's journey to death. The largest section of VG publications are those monographic studies simply entitled *Van Gogh*, with a portrait or self-portrait on the cover. These, with the proliferating essays of psychologistic and psycho-symbolic interpretations, far outnumber the relatively scarce studies of aspects of an artistic practice.

There are a number of historical factors that have made VG available for this appropriation, commencing with the reception and critical assessment of his work by Symbolist and Expressionist critics and artists, who first produced a 'Van Gogh' which would be a potential candidate for a place in art history. For instance, in Germany, the Expressionist movement took up the figure of VG not so much as an artistic resource, but as an artistic subject. He figured as hero in a novel like Meier Graefe's *Roman eines Gött-suchers* (1932) – and was subjected by authors and playwrights to dramatic characterisation in accordance with their own ideological and aesthetic positions. Carl Sternheim, for instance, published a short story *Gauguin and Van Gogh* in 1924 to argue a position current in German Expressionism. But even in one of the very first critical essays in France on VG, published before his death in January 1890 by a Symbolist critic, Albert Aurier, one finds the shape of his now established historical *persona* critically prefigured. The article was influentially entitled: *Les Isolés – Vincent Van Gogh* and was published in the first issue of *Mercure de France* in 1890.

It is permissible to make certain deductions from his works about Vincent Van Gogh, about his temperament as a man, or rather as an artist – a deduction which I could corroborate from biographical details if I wanted. What characterises his whole work is excess, of force, excess of nervous energy, of violence in expression. In his categorical affirmation of the character of things, in his often fearless simplifications of forms, in his insolence in challenging the sun head-on, in the vehement expression of his drawings and of his colour, even to the least particulars of his technique, he reveals himself as powerful, a male, a daredevil, frequently brutal and sometimes ingenuously delicate. And even more, one can guess from the almost orgiastic expressiveness of everything he has painted, here is a man of exaltation, an enemy of bourgeois sobriety and minutiae, a sort of drunken giant, a terrible and maddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always rising to a level that comes close to pathological states.

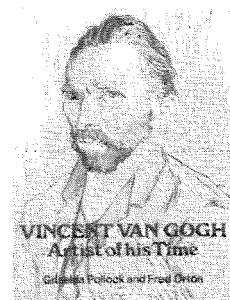
[my emphasis]

It is possible to make a checklist from Aurier's article of all the elements of the traditional myth of artist as mad genius. Aside from his own use of the term, there is 'excess', 'mania' and 'pathology'. These are coupled with the intention to find a biography and read the personality of this artistic subject off from the paintings in which it is so transparently expressed. Such a combination of myth and psychobiography not only informs later art historical readings but finds its fullest realisation within what Hammacher calls *la vie romancée* – the fictional biography or the romanticised life – terms which distinguish the popular fiction from art historical narrative.

Attempts to dislodge these readings of VG as the paradigmatic figure of artist and mad genius encounter not only traditions of interpretation, lodged within the discursive practices of art history, but the wide dispersion of such myths, the whole ideological project typified by the construct VG throughout all these facets of production of a literature of art. A further constraint is publishing practice.

In 1978 a colleague, Fred Orton, and I were approached by Phaidon Press to write a short book on Van Gogh for their series on major artists and important movements. The initial title suggested by the publishers was *Van Gogh: The Tortured Sun*; our alternative was rather more prosaic: *Rooted in the Soil – A Van Gogh Primer*. We suggested that the cover illustration should bespeak the book's intention to mark a different reading of VG which was to examine more closely the major concerns of the work and reassess its intervention in the history of modern art. Yet the book was published (in September 1978) with a cover showing a *Self Portrait* and the title *Vincent Van Gogh, Artist of his Time*. The latter represented a major concession to our 'novel' suggestion that a Van Gogh had lived and worked in a particular historical period and that this intriguing fact in some way pertained to our reading of his work. The decisions at Phaidon were not, we discovered, *editorial*. In order to sell yet another book on Van Gogh, the jacket and title had to conform to a brand identity and signify 'Van Gogh' – to present a recognisable and saleable commodity.

The opening words of our text made clear that we had laid aside biographic interest and considered his epileptic condition as irrelevant to the study of the work. However, we were sent a jacket blurb to proof which essentially said that 'everyone knows that Van Gogh went mad and killed himself but here is a new



interpretation of the artist's *work*'. In so far as we intended to provide an historical study of paintings and drawings in the form of a pictorial essay, a special distinction was drawn for our book by the publishers between 'the man' and his 'art'. But his familiar identity as the mad genius was placed as a kind of frame within which our alternative approach could be situated and contained.

One of the most prestigious academic journals in art history is the *Burlington Magazine* and its section for reviews of current publications is significantly entitled 'The Literature of Art'. There our book was reviewed in July 1979. The fact that we had attempted to locate VG within the historical moment 'of his time' presented considerable problems for the reviewer and necessitated a careful refutation:

Another recurrent theme in the essay is the notion that Vincent felt the 'need to assert a specific and increasingly anachronistic' (here a certain tendentiousness of thinking perhaps creeps in) 'view of the necessary relations between men and the earth'. This is seen as what above all else marks the 'underlying thematic unity' of his whole career whether directly expressed as in the Potato Eaters or dialectically as in the British Museum's F 1424 with its 'old' horse drawn buggy and its little railway train. It would be unjust and unfair to complain unduly of what may be felt to be a somewhat Procrustean application of social-historical conceptualisations. The authors are able to adduce contemporary documentation: and have not the space to develop their argument, but the ex post facto is here hovering in the wings.

Such a passage assumes once again that any historicising or socialising analysis is extrinsic (what writing of history isn't *ex post facto*?) to the self-evident integrity of art works. We are told that VG's practice is not there to be studied as cultural production within historical conditions. However, the problem is that that self-evidence, that givenness, the discrete integrity of art and artist, has, of course, to be produced, secured, and protected from those who argue for a history of artistic production, for art history as part of other histories, of the history of social relations and ideological representations.

Art history has to be recognised as a complex and paradoxical practice in which art is differentiated from all other areas of knowledge, secured by the positing of a centre, the artist as the cause of all art. Art is distanced from history – produced as an autonomous, transcendental condition of human subjectivity and

creativity. And, as importantly, art history is differentiated from all other discourses which attempt to reclaim art from that space and reconstitute it as a historically determined practice while deconstructing the centrality of the artist as subject of and for the work of art. Art history lays claim to this terrain through particular operations. In the second section of this article I want to examine in detail a variety of art historical and non-art historical areas, to trace the dispersion of its ideologies in a network of overlapping discourses which offer guarantees to art history.

II Van Gogh and the Pathological Syndrome

On July 29 1890 a Dutch painter named Vincent Van Gogh died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds. This event has determined the constructions of the artistic subject 'Van Gogh'. It is both the climax to and necessary closure of the narratives from which VG is produced. The suicide is taken to be an artificially significant event in terms of the artist who was both its agent and of whom it provides the explanation.

For some two or three years before July 1890 the Dutch painter is known to have suffered periodic fits during one of which he mutilated a small section of the lobe of his right ear. Speculations have been numerous on the nature and cause of these fits and associated actions. Because the painter spent a year in a mental asylum (May 1889-90) it has been readily assumed that VG was mentally ill. But in so far as the subject of this unspecified mental illness has been positioned as an artist, this madness, whether labelled schizophrenia, manic-depression or epilepsy, has been accommodated to and offered as support for a pre-existing artistic myth, that of mad genius.

In their book on the changing notions of the artist in European history since the sixteenth century, *Born Under Saturn* (Oxford 1963) R and M Wittkower provide a brief history of this category – including the Platonic idea of 'mania' – of artists as subject to an inspired and socially dangerous form of excessive behaviour, an unreasonable but creative madness which is synonymous with enthusiasm; and visionariness. They cite Seneca: 'There has never been great talent without a touch of madness' and Schopenhauer: 'Genius is nearer to madness than average intelligence'. But significantly, by the late nineteenth century, morbidity and death are added to the beliefs about the abnormal condition of great art, as in, for instance, an article in the *Popular Science Monthly* in 1893 entitled 'Genius and Suicide' in which we find 'that evidence

is not lacking that genius is a mortal condition'. The main elements of this category of artist to whom is ascribed mania, inspiration, insanity or creatively disordered intelligence, eccentricity or dangerous and abnormal behaviour, found new support in the modern period from the emergent discourses of psychiatry. But at the same time, in so far as there was already a category of madness associated with creativity, psychiatry could claim artists as subjects for their discourses. In the overlap of psychologies of creativity and art history the myth of the mad genius was reconstituted. The condition of art as akin to madness, as a socially disruptive force or a personally dangerous one is remade as *the* condition of the artist's creativity. The artistic *persona* takes precedence over either the private or the social *persona*. So in the case of VG, unspecified illness becomes doubly secured as artistic madness. It is treated not only as a facet of his artistness but a *confirmation of it*. Moreover the art, which of course arises from within this 'mad' artistic subject is examined not only for confirming signs of madness as a general condition of being an artist, but the particular styles and meanings of the art are seen to result exclusively from the maddened state of the producer. In some interpretations, this madness is presumed to be the cause of his creativity. So for instance, the sudden change to brilliant colour which occurred in his works after 1888, coincident with the first documented fits, is explained by the inspiring effect of 'descent' into madness.

A substantial area of the VG literature addresses VG from a psychiatric 'perspective' – what Hammacher labelled the 'pathological syndrome'. One of the first examples of this was published in 1922 by philosopher and psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers.⁷ In the next decades books and articles proliferated. There are two main tendencies in the literature on the pathological syndrome. The first is an attempt to diagnose VG's mental illness by conflating periodic fits with his uninterrupted activity as a painter to secure the image of the mad genius, and the second reveals a desire to correlate the interpretation of his art with a specific psychosis.

Jaspers deduced that VG was schizophrenic. His diagnosis was based in part on the limited number of paintings he had seen but predominantly on translations of VG's letters. In order to confirm his diagnosis Jaspers called for the preparation of a comprehensive *catalogue raisonné* of the paintings and drawings of VG. He would then have a sound chronological framework which would enable him to chart the development of the psychosis. In the absence of such a tool, Jaspers nonetheless attempted to divide Van Gogh's

7 K Jaspers *Strindberg and van Gogh*, Leipzig 1922. By 1931 the proliferation of conflicting interpretations enable A Hutter to publish an article 'De Vijf Diagnoses van de Ziekte van van Gogh' (The five Diagnoses of the illness of van Gogh) *Nederlandsche Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, 14th February 1931.

works into stylistic periods, to analyse the characteristics of each stage of his production, and to establish the relationship between stylistic changes and the symptoms of schizophrenia.

The last months of Van Gogh's life were spent in a northern French village, Auvers, where his palette softened, and the paintings evidence a greater dependence on tonality, as opposed to colour, and new methods of drawing in colour emerged. However, from Jaspers' conviction that VG was suffering a deteriorating psychotic condition these changes were interpreted as impoverished, unsure and monotonous. Having established the overall pattern of the years 1888-90 within which he detected the progressive signs of schizophrenia, Jaspers concluded his study with a significant passage which reveals the interaction of early twentieth century analyses of schizophrenia with traditional ideas, generalised and mythic, about the creative relationship of madness and genius:

In fact, through its release of certain forces, the mental sickness allowed for the onset of a period of productivity which previously had been precluded. The sickness freed him from certain inhibitions, the unconscious began to play a greater role and the constrictions of civilisation were cast aside. From this source as well, there developed certain similarities with dream experiences, with myths, and with the spiritual life of children . . . It is not only through this form of stimulation that an enhanced productivity is achieved, which also leads to the discovery of new means which are then added to the general artistic nomenclature, but also new powers are aroused. Such powers are, in themselves, intellectually viewed neither healthy nor sick, but they themselves flourish on the bedrock of sickness.

Jaspers links sickness with increased productivity, liberation, and imagination. Psychosis is connected with a particular kind of creativity – creativity perceived as a departure from the adult conscious norm, from civilised restraint, into the liberation of the unconscious – paralleling the child, the dream, the myth. It is both asocial and primitive.

In 1932 Françoise Minkowska disputed Jaspers' diagnosis. Following the opinions of his doctors in the South of France, Peyron and Rey, she concluded that VG suffered from epilepsy. Her analysis is, however, based more directly on his paintings (VG's doctors of course studied the patient who presented himself for treatment and whom they forbade, for the most part, to paint

8 F Minkowska 'Van Gogh: Les Relations entre Sa Vie, Sa Maladie et Son Oeuvre' *L'Evolution Psychiatrique* no 3, 1953. (Minkowska extended her analyses in *Van Gogh, Sa Vie, Sa Maladie et Son Oeuvre* Paris 1963.)

during the time he spent under their care). Teleological inevitability marks Minkowska's readings and so in the search for evidence to support her diagnosis she looked to the pattern of his work, concluding thus her discussion of what she took to be his last painting:

Without doubt, in this his final work, the artist had given striking symbolic expression to opposing, inner forces. In our own prosaic manner we can say that these two movements, one of elevation and one of fall, form the structural basis of the epileptic manifestations, just as the two polarities form the base of the epileptoid condition.⁸

In her formal analysis of the paintings she perceives signs which parallel the epileptic condition she assigns to the artist. In opposition to Jaspers, Minkowska does not seek to establish periodisation and stylistic change. Epilepsy is not progressive or deteriorating. Instead she tries to isolate a psychotic condition in the structural and compositional elements of one and all of his paintings. However, both these authors concur more than they differ. Minkowska and Jaspers' choice of diagnosis is determined on the basis of presumed characteristics of VG's art. Further, the psychiatric readings, however different in conclusion, both echo typical art historical procedures – periodisation, chronology, or formalist analysis. They both attempt to establish parallels between the nature of art and the condition of psychosis. Finally both accept that art and psychosis are not only compatible but reflexive – the latter being responsible for the emergence of a distinctive and individual artistic character – VG's style.

This process by which all potentially disparate or conflicting elements of the life and work of VG are unified and rendered coherent is exemplified in another indicative passage from Minkowska:

The life, the psychosis, the oeuvre of Van Gogh form an indivisible unity. Thus, I am unable to speak of a basic stylistic change. In this instance psychosis has not destroyed or modified anything profoundly. In its liberating role, it adds a new note by embodying at its summit the inner tragedy of the artist. [my emphasis]

The specific identity of and categorical distinctions between the social and historical circumstance of an individual's life (Life), the production and meanings of objects, paintings and drawings

(*oeuvre*), the intrusive, disruptive and non-productive force of mental illness (psychosis) are thus effaced. Like Jaspers, Min-kowska sees VG's condition as liberating and productive, but she adds a new effect – revelation. The unity of life and work that is asserted and the positive effect attributed to the psychosis on that life and work serve a common function to give access to the inner tragedy of the artist, and thus to make visible the organising subjectivity of the artist.

Such texts can both be criticised for the inadequacy and lack of rigour in diagnoses as well as for the invocation of mythic notions about the artist. But what is most striking and relevant for my purposes is the correspondence between the psychiatric analysis of an artist and the typical modes of art history. The premises may differ but the effects are not dissimilar – a chronological and in some cases teleological approach, the reading of paintings for the signs of the artist, the production of the artistic subject from the traces of his work, the unification of all experiences and products of an historical individual, Van Gogh, as the seamless unity of the artist.

An accurate diagnosis of the condition from which the Dutch painter suffered is necessary, not because I am suggesting that there is a real and different VG to be reclaimed from the myth, nor because I am simply suggesting that these authors did not do their research properly, but for the reason that on the terrain of biography or, more correctly, psychobiography, within which that Van Gogh is constituted, historical material can be adduced which categorically disallows the kind of totalisation that is the project and effect of this literature.

The doctors Rey and Peyron, first in the hospital at Arles and later in the clinic at St Rémy, consistently believed that Van Gogh was an epileptic.⁹ In letters to his family and particularly his brother Theo, Van Gogh exhibited considerable interest in this condition. These texts, as documents, were available to earlier writers and their words are decisive. According to them the attacks were clearly terrifying and disturbing experiences. But in a letter from the asylum of 1889 (LT 592) Van Gogh wrote that the doctors had been reassuring. Not only did others experience the hallucinations and hearing of voices but had been known to injure themselves in a similar manner; one epileptic had also attacked his own ear. Some months later Van Gogh wrote:

9 See letter to his sister Wilhemina (W 4) 1889 'The physician here has been to Paris and went to see Theo. He told him that he did not consider me a lunatic, but that the crises that I have are of an epileptic nature'

- 10 Margaret Ochocki
Van Gogh a
Psychological
Study B.A. Thesis
Sunderland
Polytechnic 1979
chapter 2, Epilepsy
pp 14-20. See also
D Scott *About
Epilepsy* (1969)
B Bihari 'Marshall
McCluhan
and the
Behavioral
Sciences' *Art
Language* vol 1 no
3, 1970, p 15 ff.

- 11 In W 11, Van Gogh
told his sister that
he had had four
crises and three
fainting fits, some
of which can be
dated by other
evidence to
December 1888,
February 1889,
July 1889, January
1890 and 24th
February 1890. It
is also possible
that he had either
a crisis or a
breakdown of
some sort in Paris
in the late summer
of 1887.

I think Dr Peyron is right when he says that I am not strictly mad for my mind is absolutely normal in the intervals, even more so than before. But during the attacks it is terrible, then I lose consciousness of everything. But that spurs me on to work and to seriousness, like a miner who is always in danger and makes haste in what he does. (LT 610, October 1889).

Recent research has supported this contemporary diagnosis, which has always been recognised by those not involved directly in the VG industry. However, two forms of epilepsy have been suggested: some believe that Van Gogh suffered from what is known as psycho-motor epilepsy, probably caused by slight brain damage at birth; a recent essay by Margaret Ochocki¹⁰ convincingly argued that VG may have developed symptomatic epilepsy through his consumption of absinthe, which VG first encountered when he moved to Paris in 1886. He was known to take it in vast quantities as a substitute for food during his time in Arles (1888-9). In both psycho-motor and symptomatic epilepsy the effects are similar, that is to say, periodic and intense attacks of a few minutes' duration, preceded by seconds or minutes during which perceptions and sensations may undergo a change, succeeded by longer periods of lethargy and exhaustion lasting perhaps a month at the most and followed by complete recovery. Between 1887 and 1890 Van Gogh suffered approximately seven fits, some of which were experienced only as spells of faintness.¹¹ Their incidence is therefore confined to a brief period in his mid-thirties. They were of limited duration and occurred in some cases only on visits from the asylum to Arles where VG may well have drunk absinthe. It is also worth noting, as Ochocki does, that the common treatment in the late nineteenth century was the prescription of bromide, itself now known to be a possible inciter of epileptic attacks. Bromide can accumulate in the body and contribute to a later development of 'nervous disorders' after the treatment had ceased.

Such knowledge of the poisonous nature of absinthe or the deleterious effects of bromide, which we now have, was not current in the nineteenth century although the connection between alcohol and epilepsy is hinted at in one of VG's letters (LT 585). The ways in which VG and his doctors could make sense of or represent this condition were therefore historically specific and the term that recurs is that of a 'nervous condition'. VG himself was positioned within historical practices and discourses which proposed some correspondences between abnormal conditions, excess and the practice of art, or the life of an artist. It is not surprising

that Van Gogh should have taken note of an article in *Le Figaro* about another artist who suffered from a 'nervous condition' which is now known to have been psycho-motor epilepsy, namely the Russian author, Dostoyevsky. In a novel, *The Idiot* (1868) Dostoyevsky offered a representation of the condition of psycho-motor epilepsy through the character of Prince Mishkin. At one point in the novel this character is given an interior monologue in which he tries to describe the state that occurred just prior to the onset of an epileptic fit. It is worth quoting from:

He was thinking, incidentally, that there was a moment or two in his epileptic conditions almost before the fit itself . . . when suddenly amid the sadness, the spiritual darkness and depression, his brain seemed to catch fire at brief moments, and with an extraordinary momentum his vital forces were strained to the utmost all at once. His sensation of being alive and his awareness increased tenfold at those moments which flashed by like lightning . . . All his agitation, all his doubts and worries seemed composed in a twinkling, culminating in a great calm, full of serene and harmonious joy and hope, full of understanding and the knowledge of the final cause . . . for it was not abnormal and fantastic visions he saw at that moment, as under the influence of hashish, opium or spirits, which debased the reason and distorted the mind. He could reason sanely about it when the attack was over and he was well again. Those moments were merely an intense heightening of awareness – if this condition had to be expressed in a word – of awareness and at the same time of the most direct sensation of one's own existence to the most intense degree.

Such a representation does not offer us a truth about epilepsy, but a way of reading it which points to a very different set of possibilities with regard to VG and the epileptic condition. It is absolutely impossible to determine what use VG may have made of the visions he may have had preceding the onset of one of the few fits he endured. Such representations as we do have in the texts of the letters tend to correspond with Dostoyevsky's picture of brief moments which could be reconsidered and reworked during the prevailing periods of lucidity and calm. VG's letters speak of other kinds of experiences, religious visions, for instance, which he found loathsome and rejected, or times when a fit came on but he was able to complete a painting on which he was working before unconsciousness overcame him. It is unwarrantable, however, to argue that the condition determined what or how he painted. VG cannot be positioned as mad in the sense of a continuous or pro-

gressive alteration of mental states; but as epileptic Van Gogh was subject to rare but periodic inconveniences (terrifying as the onset of a fit may have been), of attacks which rendered him momentarily unconscious, exhausted and *unable to paint* until the effects wore off.

Such arguments and alternative readings, however, are not sufficient to refute the construction of Van Gogh as mad artist, precisely because the base of that construction is neither clinical pathology nor readings of historical evidence. The pathological syndrome is both a support for and arises within the dominant narrative and psychobiographical structures of the literature we call art history.

III 'Ways of Reading'

I mentioned earlier that Karl Jaspers' interpretation of VG called for the production of a *catalogue raisonné*, the chronological ordering of the complete works which could provide access to the psychic and artistic profile of VG. In the majority of studies of VG general discussion of his crises of fits is subsumed into an exclusive concentration on the two most *dramatic* incidents, posed as revealing self-mutilations. In one, a small section of an ear lobe (*not* the whole ear) was sliced at the height of a crisis in December 1888. The other is the quiet and determined suicide which has been constructed from the act of shooting himself in the stomach in July 1890.

An article in *Horizon*¹² put forward a quite convincing argument that VG would not have died had a doctor been called in time. Morgan, rather unwarrantably, points the finger at the homeopathic doctor Gachet, under whose auspices VG was staying in Auvers, for not having brought in proper medical treatment for what were not fatal gunshot wounds. It has always been assumed that Van Gogh shot himself in the lower lungs or stomach and not his heart because of the disturbed and therefore incompetent state he was in. But it is not beyond the bounds of reasonable conjecture that VG actually shot himself, not to kill himself, but to bind his brother and sole source of financial support to him more closely, to blackmail him as he had done many times before in order to ensure VG's own financial security. His death may have been no more than a fatal mistake.

However, these two disparate and probably inexplicable events provide material for the myth. They are conflated to signify the suffering and the madness of the artist. They have become vital

12 T Morgan 'The Strange End of Vincent Van Gogh', *Horizon* vol 16 Autumn 1974.

clues to the interpretation of his painting, because his madness is subsumed into the fact of his being an artist. But since this suicide put an end to his painting as well as to his life it has been necessary to rewrite the narrative of Van Gogh's artistic practice as leading inevitably towards that death.

In order to explore the ramifications of the above I want to look at the one painting by VG that occupies a crucial place in the literature on VG, serving as the visual and psychological climax of art historical, fictional, filmic representations of his life and work.

There is only one painting by Van Gogh (known as *Crows over the Wheatfields* Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh) that immediately offers itself for misrecognition as symbolic of personal anguish, psychological dissolution and loss of power. Until a relatively recent thesis established a correct dating of the paintings of VG's last months, this one painting was universally assumed to be the last work and testament.¹³ Indeed so over-determined was this work that it was used to signify Van Gogh on the cover of the 1970 *catalogue raisonné*. It was, in fact, painted in the first week of July 1890 and not on July 27, the date on which he wounded himself, two days before he bled to death. The last major Van Gogh exhibition in England was held in the Hayward Gallery in 1968. The sequence of the hanging was not only strictly chronological but dramatic in its effects. The visitor was taken on a journey through VG's life and struggle and the exhibition concluded with two canvases, one of which was *Crows Over The Wheatfields* for which the catalogue entry disingenuously reads:

This painting is not in fact Vincent's last work, though the force of the imagery makes it appropriate for the position..

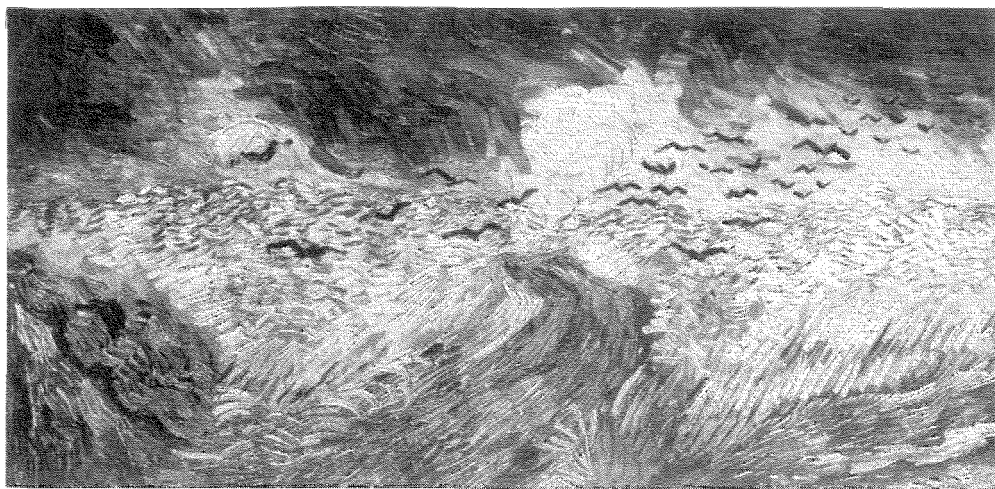
To give some impression of the kind of exegesis to which this painting has been subjected I quote three examples from different kinds of literature.

Françoise Minkowska¹⁴

There is here a heavy and menacing sky which weighs down upon the earth, as if wishing to crush it. The field of wheat moves tumultuously as if wishing to escape the embrace of the hostile force watching over it. It makes a desperate attempt to raise itself towards the sky, but the descending black crows accentuate further the imminence of destruction, the fall, the annihilation. Everything is engulfed in the inevitable shock. All resistance is useless. Van Gogh put an end to his life and work.

13 D Outhwaite *The Auvers Period of Vincent van Gogh* MA Thesis London University 1969.

14 Minkowska, op cit.



*Crows over the
Wheatfields* 1800
F779

'The World of Van Gogh' Time and Life Books (1968)

*The sky is a deep and angry blue that overpowers the two clouds on the horizon. The foreground is an ill-defined crossroads. The wheat itself rises like an angry sky to contend with the stormy sky. In this picture Van Gogh painted what he must have felt – the world was closing in on him and the roads of escape were blocked. (caption to reproduction of *Crows over the Wheatfields*).*

Meyer Schapiro 'On a Painting of Van Gogh'¹⁵

*In the *Crows over the Wheatfields* these centres have fallen apart . . . the great shining sun has broken up into a dark and scattered mass without a centre, the black crows which advance from the horizon toward the foreground, reversing in their approach the spectator's normal passage into the distance; he is, so to speak, their focus, their vanishing point. In their zigzag lines they approximate with increasing evidence the unstable wavy form of the three roads, uniting on one transverse movement the contrary directions of the human paths and the sinister flock. But the stable, familiar earth, interlocked with the paths, seems to resist perspective control. The artist's will is confused, the world moves towards him, he cannot move towards the world. It is as if he felt himself completely blocked, but also saw an ominous fate approaching.*

Meyer Schapiro occupies an interesting position in art history – he wrote for the left-wing magazine *Partisan Review* in the 1930s, has published articles on the semiological analysis of medieval art and is now enjoying somewhat belated reappraisal in both marxist and establishment art historical circles. In 1953 he published an article in *Anthropology Today* entitled 'Style' in which he assessed the range of positions in the analysis of artistic style and his concluding section on 'explanations of style by forms of social

15 Meyer Schapiro, 'On a Painting of Van Gogh' View series 7 no 1, 1946, reprinted in *Van Gogh in Perspective*, 1974, and Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries*, London, 1978.

life' based on a development of marxist theory is that which he himself endorsed in this text:

79

Only broadly sketched in Marx's work, the theory has rarely been applied systematically in a true spirit of investigation such as we see in Marx's economic writings . . . A theory of style adequate to the psychological and historical problem has still to be created. It waits for a deeper knowledge of the principles of form, construction and expression and for a unified theory of the processes of social life in which the practical means of life as well as emotional behaviour are compromised.

It is therefore pertinent to examine Schapiro's text not only as a representative academic art historical text. Its significance lies in the fact that in the work of this art historian, who can be claimed for a position within the attempted development of a marxist art history, we can detect the operations of those tendencies in art history which I have indicated as categorically opposed to a marxist conception of history and artistic production.

The article opens thus:

Among Van Gogh's paintings the Crows over the Wheatfields is for me the deepest avowal. It was painted a few days before his suicide, and in the letter in which he speaks of it we recognise the same mood as in the picture.

As an art historian concerned with the principles of style, form and expression, Schapiro's subsequent discussion of the painting begins with an outline of the syntax of the work; he attends to its construction – the disrupted perspective, the organisation of colour and the animated facture (that is the mode of application of paint and its effects). He initially remarks upon the format of the canvas used, a doublesquare format measuring 50 x 100 cm. He finds the shape strange, causing a disturbing inversion of the perspective lines. The doublesquare 50 x 100 canvas was, in fact, the most typical of Van Gogh's canvas sizes in the period during which *Crows over the Wheatfields* was painted (see for example F 770, F 771, F 772, F 773, F 775, F 776, F 777, F779). Also canvases were by this date mass-produced, their sizes determined by production processes.

Schapiro further draws attention to the colour sequence but he presents it as 'symbolic' of defensive enumeration, an exertion of control over Van Gogh's experience of personal disintegration. Moreover Schapiro tries to locate the painting in the context of VG's letters of the period in which the work is discussed. He has to admit that there is some discrepancy between his anxiety-

ridden interpretation and VG's statements about the painting's purpose – to show the restorative forces he perceived in the country while painting the picture. The explanation proposed by Schapiro runs like this: faced with his personal experience of disintegration, symbolised by the 'pathetic disarray' of the perspective in the canvas, Van Gogh used painting as a means of defending himself against his own fears:

Just as a man in neurotic distress counts and enumerates to hold onto things securely and to fight a compulsion, Van Gogh in his extremity of anguish discovers an arithmetical order of colours and shapes to resist decomposition.

Painting is presented as a cathartic process, through which the painter defends himself against himself. VG's painting, according to Schapiro, was an act of high intelligence which forestalled the oncoming collapse. Until 'In the end his despair destroyed him'. Schapiro's analysis is more penetrating, the language of formal analysis and interpretation is more sophisticated than the direct expressionist reading in the Time-Life book. The art historian introduces a problem, however. He allows for paradox, even for disjunctures, but only on the superficial level of apparent conflicts of the evidence. He proffers more knowledge. He searches back into earlier periods to find how VG viewed the act of painting. But nonetheless Schapiro's account is merely a more compelling and sustained investigation into and presentation of the artist's subjectivity. For although VG's art and state of mind are placed in a different relationship (for instance, he is presented as neurotic and tormented, a man more like other men, rather than beyond the edge of reason; his art is the site of VG's resistance to himself) it is still VG's despair, unexamined and safely couched in the seductive language of emotional excess that destroys the artist and therefore explains this painting. Not only is the work once again bound back into the subjectivity of VG, but the work itself serves as its index and revelation. The meaning of the painting results exclusively from psychological causes within VG as revealed by a parallel investigation of other paintings and verbal texts for such symptoms.

So what else could we find in the painting, what other 'VG'? What I want to propose is not merely another 'interpretation', nor a sign by sign analysis of the elements, colour, size, perspective, crows, wheatfields, the country and so on. Rather I want to disrupt and counter these dominant 'expressionist', 'symbolic', 'senti-

mentalist' – interpretations based on narrative and biographical modes of interpretative criticism and provide some suggestions for the ways in which one can locate art historical work on Van Gogh. Instead of offering the paintings to be consumed as articulations of a personality, they have to be located as practices within historically determined and therefore class constituted positions. The search for unities has to be abandoned.

Crows Over the Wheatfields was produced in the early months of July 1890, by the painter Van Gogh. But, apart from the paintings, Van Gogh also wrote an extended body of texts in the form of letters addressed to his brother Theo Van Gogh, an art dealer in Paris and sole source of financial support for VG's continuing practice as a painter. These texts are a supporting discourse produced by the painter within the uncertain conditions of art practice in late nineteenth century Europe. In them the work of VG as painter is represented by Van Gogh the writer. They can be read, not as direct historical evidence for the paintings, but as parallel historical texts which are part of a network of practices and representations. Inevitably they provide information from which the account I can provide is drawn; in doing so I have used a 'historical' mode of writing but it should be clear that the presence of an already constituted account, so full, so seductive, so reflexive creates real problems in writing or speaking about VG. But without these texts the history we could write would be different and VG would be a very different sort of figure in art historical discourses.

Crows Over the Wheatfields is dated to early July 1890. In the last weeks of June, VG had visited Paris to see his brother and family. Theo was on the verge of a nervous collapse, partly as a result of a renewed phase of difficulties with his employers, the large Parisian firm, Boussod et Valadon & Cie who saw little profit in patronage of unsaleable artists with whom Theo Van Gogh was commercially engaged, and also as a result of early symptoms of the general paralysis of the insane that finally killed him in 1891. Theo Van Gogh was the sole financial support for his wife, young son and VG himself, and also sent money to members of his family in Holland. His son was ill, his job was in jeopardy. VG returned to Auvers extremely worried about his own future. See, for instance, LT 640 after visit to Paris early July:

Back here I still feel very sad and continue to feel the storm which threatens you weighing on me. What is to be done – you see I

generally try to be cheerful, but my life is also threatened at the very roots, my steps are also wavering. [My emphasis.]

Note the construction intended to ingratiate himself with Theo but ensure that Theo is aware of the implications for him, Vincent. VG painted three canvases shortly after his return to Auvers, all on the same doublesquare format, two of which were called 'Vast Fields of Wheat under Troubled Skies'. (F 778 and F 779 Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh) and the third he called 'Daubigny's Garden' (F 776 or 777 New York Kramarsky Trust or Basle Offentliches Kunstsammlung) the garden of the house in which the French 'Barbizon' landscape painter Charles Daubigny (1817-1878) had lived and worked in Auvers. All three paintings are about 50 x 100 cm. The painting F 779 is more commonly known as *Crows over the Wheatfields*.

Writing to Theo of these canvases, on 9 July VG stated:

They are vast stretches of wheat under troubled skies and I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you will see them soon – for I hope to bring them to Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will say what I cannot say in words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the country. (LT 649.)

All three paintings were painted for his brother. The letter invites Theo to be moved by the 'sadness and loneliness' that he, Vincent, was experiencing. The painting was addressed to Theo in a language which Theo, who had been subjected to Van Gogh's cryptic and metaphoric verbal and visual communications for ten years, was meant to decode as both a warning and an invitation.

One could call wheatfields a 'major sign' in VG's *oeuvre*. He painted twelve canvases of them in June-July 1890 alone; 20 in the previous summer in St Rémy, 12 in 1888 in Arles, and from the Dutch years 1883-1885 they are very numerous. One of the first was painted in Drenthe, a remote Northern province in Holland, in the autumn of 1883, when Theo once before threatened to give up his job, and 'abandon' Vincent to his own fortunes; when Van Gogh first decided that he was a painter and made his first essays in the painting of landscape in the manner of Daubigny.

A few general remarks about paintings and drawings of wheatfields will provide a working picture. Many of them have a high horizon line, some show storms of rain slashing across the wheat



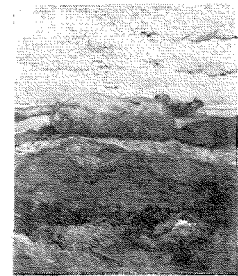
or corn, others place flocks of birds over the fields. All these devices are part of VG's rather unsuccessful attempt to master the established language of picturesque landscape painting. They also belong to his major project as an artist, derived from the positions he took up in Drenthe in 1883, that the painting of the life and work and seasonal rhythms of the country in the manner of Millet and other French landscape painters was the core of modern art. See LT 418 July 1885:

Just think over whether you do not find this true. They started with peasant's or labourer's figure as 'genre', but at the present, with Millet the great master as leader, this is the very core of modern art.

and W 4 1889, about Barbizon painters as the true modern artists and continuing leaders of European art, and LT 593 on 'the eternal youth and unsurpassed example' of Barbizon painters.

So wheatfields belong in a wide context of cycles of paintings in which seasons are signified by typical forms of agricultural work associated with them and reintroduced into nineteenth century modes of representation through painters like Millet and the novelist Zola. Especially in the novel *La Terre* (1888) Zola attached metaphorical significance to agricultural tasks as signs of growth, life and death, signifiers in a cyclical conception of human life and society. For VG, for instance, the wheatfield with reaper signified the yearly death of the harvest and therefore of humanity (LT 617), while the sower was his biblical opposite. VG's enterprises in

Fields with Blue sky
1890 F778



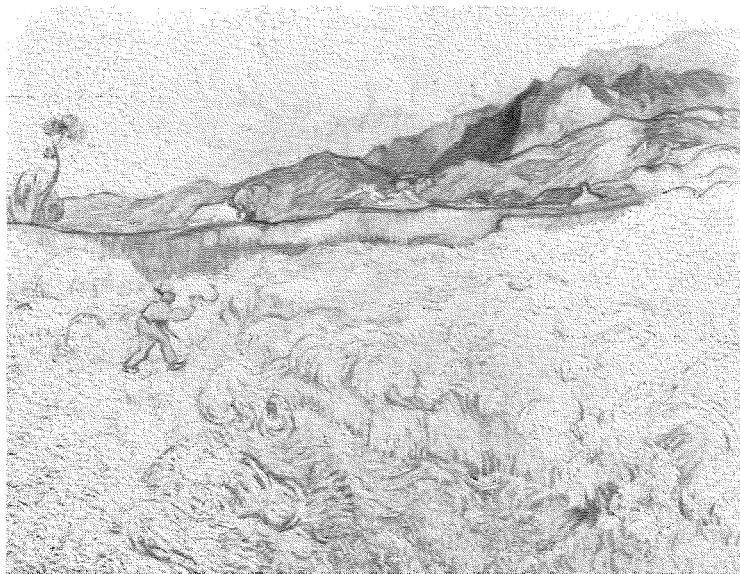
*Landscape with
haystack under a rainy
sky 1888 F 563*

*The Plough (after
Millet) 1889 F632*



this mode stem directly from the use he made of the series of wood engravings of the *Twelve Labours of the Field* and *Four Hours of the Day* by Millet, which VG copied as a preliminary exercise in drawing in 1880-81 and to which he had returned in the autumn of 1889. By that date in addition to reworking the wood engravings in the medium of oil painting he had copied a print of a painting by Millet *The Harrow* (F 632) which shows a vast, desolate and empty field under snow over which a flock of crows are wheeling. The painting included cornstakes and a darkening sky. Direct copies occur relatively rarely in Van Gogh's work. When they do, they serve an explicit purpose to reassert an allegiance to the work of certain artists whom VG took to be the key figures in a tradition of painting he wanted to revive and continue. It is rather more common to find an intentional utilisation of motifs which activate reference to paintings and the positions occupied by the painters. These artists' work not only provided VG with a model for his own work and its subject matter. They were invoked and reworked as part of his attempt to retrieve the meanings, and indirectly the conditions, of social life proposed through forms of painting that had arisen prior to capitalist industrialisation.

It is important to consider VG's position within the class structure of Dutch society in the late nineteenth century. The old civic bourgeoisie or burgher class had assumed political, economic and



*Wheatfield with
reaper 1889 F 618*

social dominance in the United Provinces (now called the Netherlands) with the development of mercantile capitalism in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century this civic patriciate opposed industrialisation (railways and early industry in the Netherlands were financed largely by foreign capital) and modernisation (national integration of the provinces). The complex manoeuvres in both VG's paintings and letters have to be read with reference to the conflicts within the *bourgeoisies* of the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Liberal bourgeois elements were in government after the revision of the constitution in 1848. It is clear from innumerable letters that VG perceived these elements as leading Holland into decline and decadence. He aligned himself with the traditional civic burgher ruling class whose dominance and interests were being challenged economically and politically both from within the Netherlands as well as from international capitalism.

Misrecognition of these determinations coupled with the refusal of the notion of class as a structural determinant has allowed VG's use of 'Millet' as a model and the agricultural labour in subject matter represented by what he called 'peasant painting' to be assimilated to humanist bourgeois interpretations such as that proposed by Schapiro of another famous signifier of VG, *The Potato Eaters* (Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Van Gogh) of which he wrote:



*The Reaper (after
Millet) 1889 F 687*



The Potato-Eaters
1885 F82

Conceived as a summation of Van Gogh's work and study up to that time (1885), it also expresses most strongly his social and moral feelings. He was a painter of peasants, not for the sake of their picturesqueness – although he was moved by their whole aspect – but from a deep affinity and solidarity with poor people, whose lives, like his own, were burdened with care.

In addition to the use of emotional explanation so firmly reinforced by the language of this passage, one sees at work here the processes of binding the work and the artist together by proposing a unity of interests between the artist and the fictions of his own work, who are taken (mistaken) for real people, real peasants rather than as images produced by a bourgeois painter using members of the rural proletariat who modelled for money during periods of prolonged unemployment. This process is even more apparent in a Schapiro passage on a painting of a weaver at a loom from the same text:

Van Gogh gave to the image of the worker at the machine a high solemnity and power. In the earnest skilful weaver, he felt, no doubt, a kinship with his own artistic work.

VG's reworking of systems of representation available in the late nineteenth century, using prints of paintings by Millet, paintings by Daubigny and so on, in combination with VG's practice of painting directly from the motif and the model, produced contradictions and disjunctures in his practice. When he set up his easel in front of a scene, VG saw that scene both in terms of modes of representation current fifty and even two hundred years previously (seventeenth century Dutch art). He painted the scene before him in order that it might represent his own civic, mercantilist bourgeois reaction to 'progress' and modern urban society. However, he encountered great difficulties as a result of this. The paintings rarely worked to represent that position, and in doubt Van Gogh reverted to virtual imitation of such painter's work as he *could* reproduce. One of these was Daubigny, who had lived and worked in Auvers and who painted broad fields of corn on wide horizontal canvases, usually in a *doublesquare* format (100 x 200 cm) with high horizon lines, compressed space, shallow depth of field. There are for instance two paintings now in the Kroeller-Mueller Museum in Otterlo entitled *Cornfield Under a Stormy Sky* and *Young Corn*. In the former a path leads centrally into the fields of corn only to disappear in their midst. In the

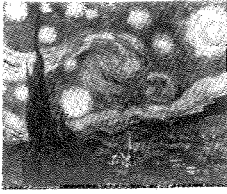


latter the painting is divided in the centre horizontally between heavy sky and billowing wheat and a path enters the field centrally but disappears into it while to either side rough, unsown ground skirts the field to be closed off by the stalks of the growing corn. In 1873 Daubigny had exhibited at the Paris Salon, which Van Gogh had visited, a vast and snowy scene entitled simply *Snow of Winter* (100 x 200 cm) (Paris, Louvre). There, in a vast and empty expanse of snow-covered ground, a dark clump of trees stand out and a flock of crows roost in their bare branches or peck the frozen earth beneath. Van Gogh associated flocks of crows with both Daubigny and Millet, for in a letter of September 1880 he had written of a winter scene in Belgium,

Daubigny Snow of Winter 1873

I also noticed flocks of crows made famous in the paintings of Daubigny and Millet. (LT 136.)

Crows and wheatfields had not only an extensive context within Van Gogh's practice, but a purpose within his vocabulary and a place within the representational formula of a particular group of late nineteenth century painters. In dwelling on these motifs I am hoping to indicate something of the complexity of a single Van Gogh painting, the multiplicity and potential range of meanings signified by a few motifs within one such landscape; a set of resonances which has to be unravelled across a variety of texts and within a reconstruction of VG's highly ambitious and problematic project as an artist in the 1880s in France and Holland. In order to return to the painting in question it is necessary to place VG's use of landscape painting in relation to the signification of the city for



Starry Night 1889
F 612

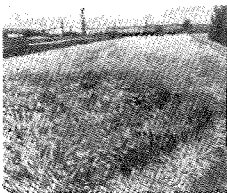
him, as centre of speculative commerce in opposition to the organic, natural world. In a letter of October 1883, Van Gogh had written to Theo one of many diatribes against the city in the hope of persuading Theo not to emigrate to America but join him in the country and become a painter. The argument was posed in the idealist terms of Nature opposed to the city, signifying modern urban industrial society, and characterised above all by a market economy. He was thus attempting to persuade Theo to leave the world of dealing and speculation in the art market and partake in the great Carlylian worship of supernatural nature.

Van Gogh read Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1831) in 1883, from which he derived the vocabulary for articulating his idealist and pantheistic conceptions of nature, and within which he remained fixed until the last years, painting, for instance, the famous *Starry Night* (1889 F 612 New York Museum of Modern Art) according to Carlyle's prescriptive symbolism:

Then sawest thou this fair Universe, were it the meanest province thereof, is in very deed the star-domed city of God; that through every star and every blade of grass, and most through every living soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the Time-Vesture of God, and reveals Him to the Wise, hides Him from the foolish.

In LT 332 of 1883, this formulation occurs:

If at the same time you wandered through the cornfields and moors, to renew what you yourself express as 'I used to feel part of nature; now I do not feel that way any longer'. Let me tell you, brother, that I myself experience so deeply, so very deeply what you say there. That I have been through a period of nervous, arid overstraining – there were days when I could not see anything in the most beautiful landscape just because I did not feel part of it. It is the street and the office and the care and the nerves that make it so.



Wheatfield with the Alps in background
1888 F 411

Rural analogies were adopted and adapted for a longing to return to an eternal order, signified by the idea of nature. In a later letter to Theo we find:

But in order to grow you must be rooted in the earth. So I tell you don't wither on the sidewalk. You will say there are plants that grow in the city – that may be but you are corn and your place is in the cornfield. (LT 336.)

In VG's letters one finds a wealth of material which throws light on the events of June 1890 and suggests a way of reading the 'statement' made by a painting of crows over a wheatfield accompanied by a letter, both addressed to Theo. Both were intended to convey 'the health and restorative forces' of the country.

In the letters of the later part of July 1890 up to and including the one apparently found on VG after his death, the difficulty of relations between living artists and the dealers in 'dead artists' was repeatedly addressed. VG constructed Theo as a different kind of dealer, stressing his unique and 'creative' contribution to the making of modern art, namely the work of VG himself, through his continuing financial support. However, the letters suggest that VG represented these difficult conditions of art practice to himself in terms of public misunderstanding, ideologies of vanguardism and the search for what he called 'sympathetic' lovers of art. A previous threat of withdrawal of Theo's financial support had occurred in 1883 and in the letters of autumn 1883 the absurd ignorance of public opinion on art is compared to the croaking of ravens. (LT 339). I am not suggesting that crows or ravens or any other birds of prey simply equal dealers or 'absurd' public opinion – that would be to collapse the letters into the paintings – but such a conjunction of concerns and metaphors throws light on the network of signs and meanings which structured VG's texts and which must condition the way we make readings of VG paintings. At the same time, it points to the problems that were inherent in the artist's attempts to produce meaning through the signifying process of painting in and against the signifying processes of writing. The painting, *Crows over the Wheatfields* of July 1890, far from being presented, therefore, as the culminating climax of a sequential narrative, the revelation of the artist, has to be approached as a complicated text, which calls for a different kind of work, not of narration or interpretation, but decoding. Attention has to be paid to broad fields of nineteenth century discourse, to the conditions of production, to practices of representation which are not coherent, legible or consistent but uncertain, and contradictory.

IV 'Lust for Life' – Artist and Media

Despite the resistance by art history to the production of discourses outside of its privileged place in the literature of art, particular discursive structures, both narrative and psychobiographical, are common to both the texts of *la vie romancée*, the popular fictional biography, and art history. It is perhaps the coincidence of narra-

- 16 There is a great deal of work to be done on the status of the VG myth in America in the 1950s and on the role of VG within Minnelli's *oeuvre*, both in relation to melodrama and in terms of the artist and the figures of the neurotic.

tive structures which render art history and Stone's novel *Lust for Life* translatable into filmic narrative. In this section I want to consider the construction of Van Gogh in another site of the production of representations of the artist, the film, *Lust for Life*. This was directed by Vincente Minnelli in 1955 for MGM with Kirk Douglas in the lead role. It was based upon Stone's novel, one of the prime texts in Hammacher's category, *la vie romancée*, the popular fictive biography. At the same time, the film *Lust for Life* operates in a different area of consumption and can therefore be examined as an example of dispersion of the effects of art historical discourse.

MGM had bought the film rights to Stone's novel but the option was due to expire in December 1955. Stone, anticipating the revocation of the rights, was already planning a film version of his own, as was Kirk Douglas who was preparing through his own production company a film on Van Gogh's life in which he would star. The film was in fact made by MGM in five months between June and December 1955 and was released in 1956.¹⁶

Minnelli believed Van Gogh had been hereditarily insane and saw motifs in his work as symbols. The sun, for instance, was a symbol of the repressed turmoil of 'the maelstrom he was always fighting'. Such a reading serves to set Van Gogh apart while subjecting him to voyeuristic representation – the artist as irredeemably mad and driven towards self-destruction while the art remains as his testament of struggle – echoing that reading made by Schapiro discussed above. It is hardly surprising to find that the culminating climax of the film is a representation of Van Gogh shooting himself in the wheatfield as he tries to paint the *Crows over the Wheatfields*.

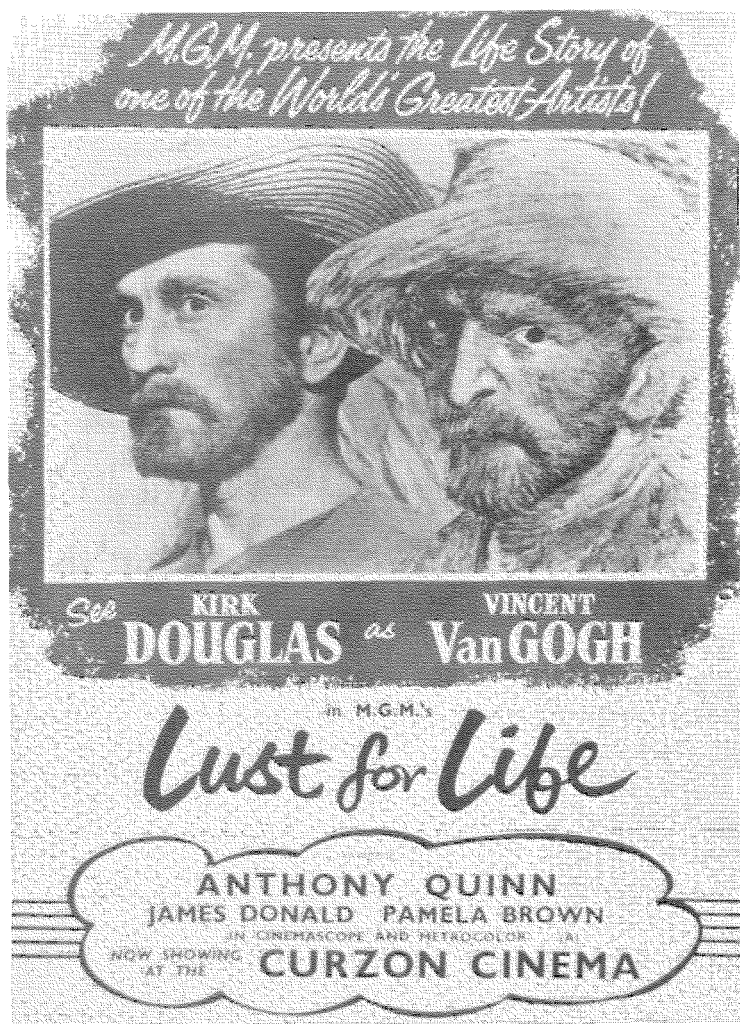
According to Minnelli the film received the best reviews of any of his pictures. *Time* magazine concluded that it was 'Hollywood's most profound exploration of artistic life'. Indeed the film was sold as a biography, collapsing the artistic work into personality. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote 'something of a Van Gogh painting inhabits this sincere and absorbing biography of that strange and disturbed man'. Such an effect was no doubt strengthened by all the meanings the star Kirk Douglas brought into the visual reconstruction of Van Gogh and it is tempting to recall in relation to Douglas' screen *persona*, Aurier's words describing Van Gogh: 'Powerful, a male, a daredevil frequently brutal, sometimes ingenuously delicate'.

Dissenting voices were raised, however – the *Time* critic took issue with the Minnelli presentation of VG as mad, commenting

that VG was known to be epileptic, adding, 'Van Gogh's epilepsy halted his painting but does not explain it'. This critic also draws attention to effects of the narrative necessities and drives of the filmic process:

The film captures the fierce drive and bitter tragedy of the life of Van Gogh . . . But because the Hollywood story builds relentlessly to Van Gogh's ear slicing for its climax . . . Lust for Life falls midway between being a first rate art film and a high pitched melodrama.

In Minnelli's film the narrative economy of the film drives towards the climax of self-mutilation and release through the death which is anticipated by a series of personal rejections and physical sufferings and mutilations. It lingers over the minor incident in which

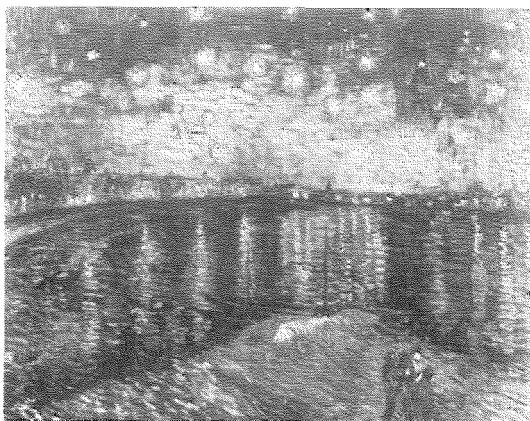




Night Café 1888
F 463



Lust for Life



*Starry Night on the
Rhône* 1888 F 474

VG is said to have put his hand into a flame to prove the durability of his love for his cousin, draws out the suspense of VG's dramatic attempt on Gauguin's life, situates the build up to the cutting of his own ear through brutal music and lush, reddened colour. Just prior to that event, Van Gogh/Douglas is placed before a mirror so that his attack on himself is constituted as a rejection of himself by himself. His final releasing act of suicide is located within one of own paintings, the wheatfields with the crows. His last words as he dies are 'I want to go home', a phrase which not only effects the closure of his life but the filmic narrative; it releases him and the audience.

The film tries to visualise VG's life in terms of his paintings. We are shown reconstructions of scenes he painted. They are not only offered to us as he painted them, without any suggestion of mediating practice, but serve to render transparent this same process of mystification of production with regard to the film's construction. On the one hand we see him opening a window in Arles onto an orchard in blossom which dissolves into VG paintings of blossoms, as if they were no more than his inner mental images as he looked at the scene and not *representations* made of a scene. Alternatively his paintings are carefully and faithfully reconstructed as *sets*, so that Van Gogh becomes virtually a figure in his own paintings. Much is made of his sitting like one of the all-night prowlers in the reddened interior of the *Night Café* (F 463 New Haven Yale University Art Gallery), a painting *à propos* of which he, the fascinated bourgeois *flâneur* in working class haunts, stated that it was a place one (but not we the bourgeois) could go mad in. The film 'places' VG, eliding his imputed state of mind with his own paintings, refusing to recognise those works as representation and as practice – realising in full the effects of the written texts on VG.

In the text already quoted Schapiro made much of the disturbing perspective he thought he saw in the *Crows over the Wheatfields* painting. Marks in the painting which signify birds are spoken of as if they were real animate birds flying around the painting, yet simultaneously operate on a connotational level as harbingers of death (Schapiro refers to these birds as 'figures of death'). The effect is apparently produced by distortion of single point perspective, or its reversal. Within the realist conventions of the film *Lust for Life* such illusions of real objects in motion can be produced, and the photographic single-point perspective systems operate to direct this represented motion towards the spectator of the film.



In the penultimate episode of the film *Van Gogh/Kirk Douglas* is shown painting this painting, a scene of extensive wheatfields around which crows are hovering. His work as a painter is thus presented at one level as direct transcription from a real scene. Suddenly, however, the crows move in, but not towards the spectator. They close in on the figure of Van Gogh whom they harass and attack. The artist is positioned as the object of the attack. The effect of this is to contain the attack within the perspective system of the film and to shift a scene of painter and motif into a different connotative reading – to signify VG's disturbed state, to make the signs of his paintings the signifiers of his mental condition which is then played out, dramatically. Van Gogh gives up his painting and, scribbling a note which reads (roughly) 'I cannot take any more' shoots himself.

In *Lust for Life*, the spectator is positioned as viewer of pictures produced by photographic representations through which Van Gogh is placed as a figure in his own landscape paintings. At the same time, these landscapes are offered as externalised, visualised images of the artist's 'inner' landscape. These dual processes not only foreclose notions of the production of art as a signifying system but propose that the meanings of works of art are available to direct visual experience which can be represented unproblematically, simply reconstructed in a film. Through the narrative organisation of a filmic biography, lavishly illustrated and illustrating, what is realised and confirmed is the construct of the artist as the effect of his works, the hero of the story, the character whose 'truth' is to be sought and visualised, reconstructed and made plain. The unity of artist and art, a unifying classless subjectivity, paralleling the psychobiographical impetus of art history as manifested in the texts on VG quoted above is accomplished within cinematic representation in *Lust for Life*. That such a coincident representation is both possible and accepted, with only the minor qualifications from critics that I quoted above, is itself significant. The translation from art history to *la vie romancée* and to the film *Lust for Life* is founded upon not only the dispersion of art history's ideological figure of the artist as cause and effect of art, but upon the discursive structures through which such ideologies are produced, the literature of art, the narrative practices of art history.

Conclusion

The purpose of my analysis of some of the discursive practices, structures and categories of art history and their dispersion across a range of practices of representation, exceeds, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, the internal problems of the practice of a marxist social history of art. That art history can be analysed as a practice of 'interpretative criticism', a hegemonic practice, the site of the production of bourgeois ideas about art and artist, is of course central to identifying the modes and manoeuvres by which art is evacuated from history, history from art history, precluded even. Marxist art historical work faces above all the problem of historicising a specific practice of representation but of a particular mode – visual representation. This means producing modes of analysis both appropriate to the historical specificity of that practice while simultaneously deconstructing the notion of art as a visual experience. Take for instance the reviewer of the work of feminist artists like Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller and Alexis Hunter at the Hayward Annual Exhibition in 1978, Tim Hilton, who considered their work the weakest part of the show:

Much of this is instructive, in its way, but it is not instructive to the eye. In many ways one is encouraged to read this exhibition rather than experience it visually 'Times Literary Supplement' (27 June 1978).

The effects of an informed marxist intervention will itself exceed the discrete domain of art history, however because of the effects of art historical discourses beyond art history's apparent boundaries – into art practice, art criticism, representations of art and the artist, indeed into current conditions of the production of art. It is time we began to take art history seriously as a significant site of marxist work and challenge the bourgeois ideologies of art and artist on the terrain in which their hegemony is produced and secured.

A NOTE IN REPLY TO PETER WOLLEN

Peter Wollen's reply to my article on *Olympia* is intense and eloquent, but I believe it gets the drift of my argument wrong, and not in trivial ways. It is tempting to go into details, and the temptation should be resisted for the reader's sake. But let me at least say one thing by way of example. I am quoted as stating, *à propos* of class in *Olympia*, that 'The signs of social identity are as unstable as all the rest', and immediately asked if I 'really think that class identity is something necessarily clear and definitely fixed?' Of course I do not. (The word proletarian carries no such suggestion in my usage; nor did it, to my knowledge, in Marx's.) The question I put of *Olympia*, in the matter of class as in other matters, was not simply whether its texture of signs was unfixed and ambiguous, but whether that unfixing was such that the signs were no longer effectively readable, in their separateness and contradiction of

— which I suppose to be inescapable in any idiom called 'modern' — become empty and delectable, and cease to do critical work.

I can do no better than reiterate each other.¹ This is not an argument on my part for closure and simplicity versus openness and complexity, but about the conditions in which the latter qualities

1 At the risk of being tedious, I should say that I am in the end more unhappy about my answers to that question than Peter Wollen appears to be. In the finished version of the study I shall argue, rather to the contrary of my article in *Screen*, that it was the degree to which *Olympia* contrived some measure of determinacy in its representation of a prostitute's class — in particular, the degree to which it made nakedness a signifier of class position — that is the key to the critics' cognitions and silences. But the issue between Peter Wollen and myself is the legitimacy of the questions, not the correctness of the answers, and I shall restrict myself to discussing that.

98 what seemed to me the main concern, and the main prescription, of my study of *Olympia*. 'Is there a difference', it tried to ask, 'a difference with immediate tactical implications, between an allowed, arbitrary and harmless play of the signifier and a kind of play which contributes to a disruption of the smooth functioning of the dominant ideologies? If so . . . artistic practice will have to address itself to 'the specific positioning of the body in the economic, political and ideological practices'; it cannot take its own disruptions of the various signifying conventions as somehow rooted, automatically, in the struggle to control and position the body in political and ideological terms; it has to articulate the relations between its own minor acts of disobedience and the major struggles — the class struggle — which define the body, and dismantle and renew its representations.' Certainly I suggested all through the article that the answers to these questions might be bound up with others: questions having to do with the effect, address, place, provenance and belonging of the work of art. We might find ourselves asking, more often than is usual in modernist practice and commentary, questions of the form: Who is this work of art for? Who might its public be (who did it want or intend to take that curious part?) and how does it address them? How, and how appropriately? Do its modes of address confirm certain kinds of dominance and misunderstanding, or refute them? Does the work attain to *vividness*, for anyone? (Vividness here is not the same as simplicity and closure; rather the contrary, in fact; it is the ground on which we might at all be entitled to talk of a work of art having richness of detail, and therefore being complex — possessing, among other

kinds of order, inconsistencies and contradictions which strike the reader or viewer as qualifying a meaning (or meanings) in some pertinent way.)²

Two things might be added to that brief restatement of the case. First, that this line of questioning scarcely appears in Peter Wollen's summary of my argument and his response to it. It is displaced by a set of demands, which Wollen is sure are mine, for an art which is closed, uniform, complete and unambiguous: a form of Realism, with dear old Courbet for its patron saint. All this to be built peremptorily on the ruins of modernism, or of any artistic practice which is or tries to be open, disparate, unfinished and aware of contradiction. This is not my argument, but let us allow it a certain ghastly interest in its own right. Peter Wollen's defence of the latter kind of practice — which does indeed seem like the right one on the face of it, the kind 'revolutionaries' ought to approve of — rests essentially on two propositions.

2 The question of vividness in artistic cases is interestingly explored, I think, in the article 'Portrait of V I Lenin' in *Art-Language*, vol 4, no 4, 1980. There are things in Peter Wollen's response which suggest to me that behind his seeming unconcern for such questions may lie a feeling — a practitioner's feeling — that to ask them in the present circumstances would be merely demoralising. It would paralyse practice altogether. But seeing that as a reason for not asking them would depend on our not thinking modernist art practice already in some kind of paralysis, or at least aphasic disturbance. And it would leave out of account the fact — which I return to later — that modernism itself has regularly generated these questions, and they seemed a spur to further work, not a deterrent. (Which work, as with Dada and the Constructivists, has later been cannibalised *ad nauseam* by other modernists to whom the original questions did not matter or were anathema.)

First, that art cannot be settled and complete because history (class struggle) is not; second, that art can be unsettled and incomplete because (or insofar as) those qualities 'reflect a contradiction in the real'. Comment on these propositions can be brief. The first is unexceptionable to the point of vacuity: it could act as a license (has so acted) for any and every avant-garde drivelling. But I do not disagree with it, and that Peter Wollen makes me out to do so depends, I think, on a play on the words 'settled and completed'. I do not mean by them, in my article, what Zhdanov meant, or Lukács. And *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* would certainly stand as settled and completed, in my terms — a bit too much so, I would argue. In the second proposition, the word 'reflect' is odd. Peter Wollen and I would surely agree that art should do more than simply mirror a contradiction. We would wish it, presumably, to articulate that point of difficulty, to 'enable us to see the mechanisms which sustain . . . this antithetic reality [produced in and through the ideologies which are dominant in a given social formation] misrecognised as evident and uniform'. The words are Wollen's own, but it is not clear from his text who the 'we' might be, in any such sentences. It is not even clear that he takes that question — that kind of question — to matter; and the final flurry of assertions — the disclaiming of any concern for the care and comprehension of the critics — seems dangerously close to straight modernist chutzpah. (Do you mean *all* critics, not just Marina, Vaizey and Robin Wood? You mean that you would not expect the care and comprehension of a critic as good as Ravenel, or, come to that, Gautier, or Thoré, or Castagnary, all of whom were baulked or baffled by *Olympia* in 1865?

So does it not matter, for instance, if films which claim to describe the mechanics of 'femininity' — I mean the best of them, those that do unravel at least a few of the Sphinx's riddles — have little resonance, or none at all, outside the world of cine-clubs and weekend schools? If not — and the answer might still be No — it seems to me that you promise yourself an unenviable limbo. It may be the one art occupies, but it is not that the *problem* — one of the problems, perhaps the most pressing, of art practice at this moment?)

Which brings me back to the second gloss I wished to add to my initial questions. It does not seem to me that they are inherently anti-modernist, as stated. For the attempt to draw a believable line between harmless formal play and harmful unsettling of categories is one which is integral to modernist art — or at least that part of it which Peter Wollen and I might agree to be worth the name. And do not questions of effect and address come back time and again to haunt modernism's (sometimes profound) slumbers, and provoke its fiercest innovations — in the Russian cinema of the 1920s, or the aborted moves of Unovis in Vitebsk; in the activities of the November Group in Berlin, during the brief period when Expressionists and Dadaists still had unlikely truck with each other, and with the Workers' Councils; in some things achieved by very early and very late Surrealism, and by those who enforced that movement's ending; in the work of Tatlin and the Productivists; and, yes, in certain kinds of Realist reaction, the kinds that appear to comprehend exactly the strategies just listed, and to try to resist them point by point (Hopper, occasionally; or some of Beckmann's

100 graphic work; or, dare I say it, early Rossellini?).

I do decline, at last, to a litany; and my list, I admit, is of scraps and leavings; it is a catalogue of moments at which modernism was compelled, and not just by exterior circumstance, to exceed its normal terms of reference and sketch out others, in preliminary form. But the moments are part of modernism, that is my point; and it seems at present that they are the ones we shall have to retrieve and learn from.

Insofar as my article had a polemical point, it was this. I did not see myself as arguing for an art of closure and simplicity, but rather for an art practice which might presume to determinacy, to some kind of articulate and corrigible representation, and to a measure of effective and precise address — a sense of a public, and not in general and hectoring terms (not 'Art for Society'). There is a passage in the Preface of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which the philosopher criticises 'the initial appearance of the new world' in the thought of Schelling and others, which will do very well to recapitulate the issues.

Consciousness, Hegel writes, misses in the newly emerging shape its former range and specificity of content, and even more the articulation of form whereby distinctions are securely defined, and stand arrayed in their fixed relations. Without such articulation, Science lacks universal intelligibility, and gives the appearance of being the esoteric possession of a few individuals: an esoteric possession, since it is as yet present only in its Notion or in its inwardness; of a few individuals, since its undiffused manifestation makes its existence something singular. Only what

is completely determined is at once exoteric, comprehensible, and capable of being learned and appropriated by all.

I suppose we have to give up the possibility of *complete* determination, and accept, as Hegel could not, that capitalist society is inherently a place of obfuscations, discontinuities, blankness and uncertainty. (It is the glorying in those conditions of consciousness sometimes sickens me in modernism, not the assumption that they form, willy nilly, the grounds of our various thought and action, and therefore demand adequate representation.) But with all the provisos, it still seems to me that the search for determinacy, in the work, of that which determines it — is the interesting one. We are not going to aid that search, I feel, by falling too readily into characterising any criticism of received modernist positions — especially the refusal (the essential modernist move) of all questions of address and determination³ — as Realist or retrograde. I personally do not take the former epithet, or even its extension by the deadly qualifier Socialist, as necessarily vacuous or nasty; but equally I do not expect those representations which will break, in the next decade or so, with modernist conventions to adopt either epithet as their own; and they will probably be right not to do so, since their tactics of depiction and analysis will be grounded in the advanced art of the last hundred years as much as directed against it; and the work itself will surely not resemble *Buddenbrooks*, or even *Happy End*.

³ Apart, I mean, from the trivial maundering about 'medium' and its unlikely powers.

STEVE NEALE

HOLLYWOOD STRIKES BACK SPECIAL EFFECTS IN RECENT AMERICAN CINEMA

Among the films that Hollywood has produced over the past few years, the following have proved to be particularly successful: *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Star Trek – The Movie*, *The Black Hole*, *The Alien* and *Superman*. A number of these films have broken box office records. They have all had huge audiences. Success, however, is not the only thing that unites them. They share a number of features which, together, have served to distinguish them collectively as a particular cycle or trend and it is these that have made them the success they have been.

All these films belong, more or less, to the genre of science-fiction. Such inter-generic affiliations as exist within them links them either to the fantasy/adventure genre (as is the case with *Superman*, *Star Wars*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*) or else, alternatively, to the horror film (as is

the case, above all, with *The Alien*). All three of these genres are heavily marked by their status as 'fiction' and 'fantasy'. As such they involve a complex and delicate regime of make-believe, drawing extensively upon the ability of the cinematic signifier and of cinema in general to *convince*. So strong are the pressures exerted by this regime, so problematic its successful inscription, that the genres themselves have persistently been marginalised, relegated historically to the realms of the 'B' movie and addressed largely to adolescents and to children. Their adult spectators, meanwhile, have only been able to sustain their belief by constructing an imaginary other: it is this other who is naïvely and childishly duped; the spectators themselves, of course, know better. It is children who are normally attributed with occupying this imaginary position, but there is a variation on this structure in the horror film where it is women who are credulously terrified while the male spectators are not really frightened at all.

This article is elaborated from the introduction to a book on film and technology to be published by the BFI and Macmillans.

102 Either way, it is ideologically crucial that it is the adult male who knows best.

What these genres all test is the spectator's capacity to believe and the cinema's capacity to sustain it. In thus risking disenchantment with this capacity, what is at stake – almost literally – in these genres is the credibility of the cinematic apparatus. Thus, the significance of this particular cycle of films is not just that they have successfully revived a moribund genre, nor even that they have managed to make it of central rather than marginal importance (and so justify the expenditure of millions of dollars), it is, above all, that in doing both these things they have re-stated and re-newed one of the fundamental powers of the cinematic institution itself: its ability to make us believe, to fill us, however reluctantly, with something like childlike wonder. Which is perhaps the significance of the figure of the little boy in *Close Encounters*. While the adults around him are either unnecessarily frightened, sceptical or uncertain, he unhesitatingly believes and accepts all along. It is hence he, along with those adults who come to adopt his position, who proves not only to be right, but to be fit for the wondrous experience he undergoes.

Another mark of these films is the insistence within the stories they tell of classically Oedipal structures and themes. A Luciferian Maximilian Schell in *The Black Hole* commits the sin of over-reaching his human capacities and is punished by ending up – iconographically – in hell. The orphaned hero of the *Star Wars* saga searches for his identity across the positions he is offered by his ideal father (Obi Wan Kanobi) on the one hand and by his real father (Darth Vader) on the other. It is in defining himself in opposition to the latter that he comes, of course, to find it. *Superman*, meanwhile,

bears all the hallmarks of pure family romance: a child is born with super-human powers; the humble farming couple who raise him on earth are only his fosterparents; his real parents, now dead, were the rulers of another planet. Family romance with a vengeance! The 'V'ger' in *Star Trek – The Movie* is obsessed by its search for a force that it calls 'the creator'. *The Alien* features a monster which is borne by a man, literally tearing him to pieces in the process. The suspense and the terror of the narrative thus organise themselves around a threat to the Oedipal order and the rules of patriarchy. Order is only restored when the monster is destroyed by a woman, who thus succeeds at last in putting herself back in her 'proper' place. And so on.

Oedipal themes and structures, of course, are fundamental to the mode of narration adopted and circulated by mainstream film. Their importance lies not just in the provision of a paradigm for the ways in which stories are shaped and developed and for the ways in which the relations between the characters are structured. It lies also in the fact that what they fundamentally articulate is fantasy and thus the relationship between the viewer and the film. As the narrative plots the identity and position of the characters, so it also plots the identity and position of the spectator, as it gives form to the meanings it generates, so it also gives form to the spectator's relationship to them. In the version adopted by mainstream cinema, identity, position and meaning are confirmed, along with the Oedipal order that underpins them. The significance of the re-iteration of these themes and structures in this context lies in the fact that they are inscribed so simply and emphatically, with few complexities of narration and

few displacements in the articulation of the basic figures and fantasies involved. Their re-iteration is thus an unequivocal re-statement of the basis of cinema in narrative, of the basis of narrative in the Oedipal order and of the place of the spectator within it, an emphatic renewal of one of the traditions of the cinematic institution.

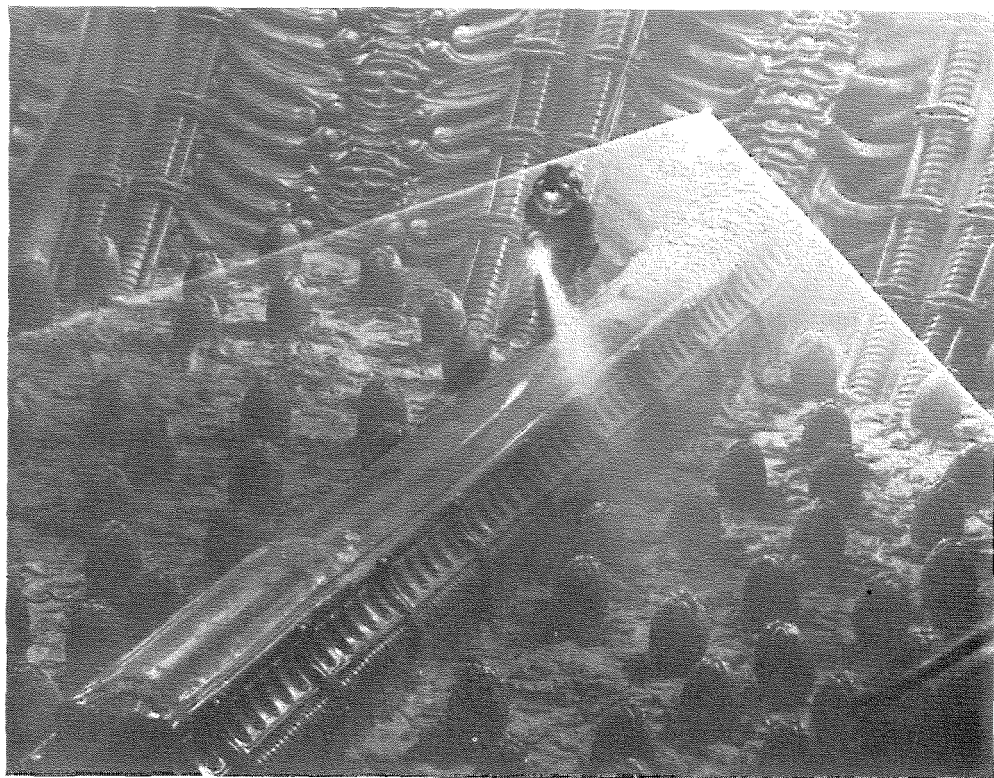
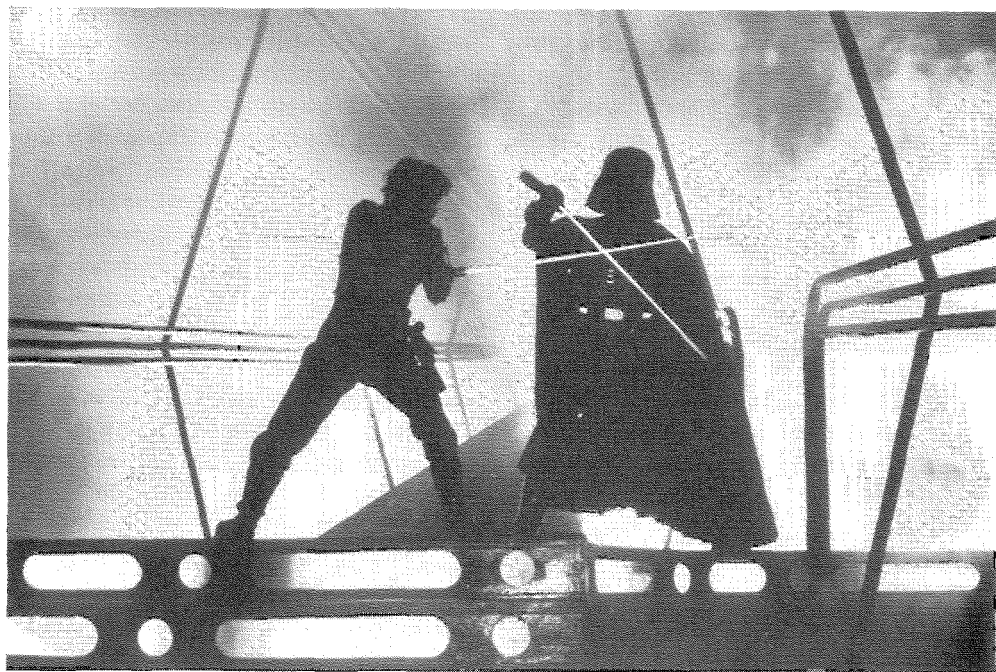
There are two other characteristics shared by these films. Both relate to technology on the one hand and to the process of re-inscription and renewal on the other. The first of these, and one of the most celebrated, has been their deployment of special effects. Highlighted both in the reviews that have accompanied the films and in the trade press and its specialist journalism, they have been the subject of much discussion and hyperbole. The distinguishing marks of the special effects technology involved in the production of these particular films have been their multiplicity and novelty, both of which signal, in their turn, something about the scale and the nature of current Hollywood production. To instance the multiplicity, it is worth just noting that it is claimed that *Star Wars* involved over 360 effects in all, that some scenes in *The Black Hole* necessitated the use of over 12 separate photographic processes and that over 100 separate matte paintings were produced for *Close Encounters*.¹ As for the technology itself, its mark has been the deployment of computerised electronics, particularly in alliance with automatic camera systems. The advantage of this technology, from the point of view

of the industry, is that it enables complex camera movements to be programmed in such a way that they can be repeated identically – an enormous advantage in filming models for mattes since the identity of the repetition enables mattes to be easily matched across all the takes necessary to the production of a composite image.

This technology is fairly new. What it seems to mark is a shift in the history of special effects and their mode of production. Where, in the early days of film, the production of effects was very much an individual artisanal process, the 1930s saw the artisan brought into the studio team as another 'specialist'. More recently, the disaster movie cycle has inaugurated the return of special effects as a hallmark of Hollywood production, following an uncertain period that coincided with the demise of the studios. *Earthquake*, *The Towering Inferno* and the rest all relied upon a multiplicity of special effects in many ways similar to that of the recent cycle of science-fiction films, but what they lacked, it seems, was a technology adequate to their scale. This is what computerisation has provided. And it is no accident that it has resulted in the establishment of special effects enterprises by John Dykstra (who supervised the effects on *Star Wars*) and by Douglas Trumbull (who supervised the effects on *Close Encounters*). It is no accident either that the multiplicity and sophistication of effects in some of these recent films has been so great that a considerable number of special effects specialists and teams have been involved in their production, the most obvious case being *Star Trek*, which involved two (rather than one) special effects teams, though this was partly the result of a limited production schedule.

But special effects, of course, are not

¹ A matte is a process by which one part of the frame is left unexposed so that it can later incorporate a separately photographed element, thus producing a composite image. Its composite nature can be concealed, however, by careful matching and blending of the elements involved.

*Alien**Star Wars*

simply a matter of technology. In his article 'Trucage and the Film' (*Critical Enquiry*, vol 13 no 4, Summer 1977) Metz has outlined and underlined the fact that they involve a precise and classical division of belief – a division characteristic of fetishism. The spectator knows that the effects are indeed just effects but this knowledge itself is repressed:

The spectator is not the victim of the machination to the point of being unaware that it exists, but he is not sufficiently conscious of it for it to lose its impact.

Special effects thus depend upon and intensify the fetishistic aspects of the genres of 'fantasy' in particular and of the cinema and its signifier in general. In involving an aspect of avowal and recognition, as well as an aspect of denial and repression, they enable the cinematic institution to have it both ways. As Metz puts it, it can pull its illusions out of the hat while displaying simultaneously its capacity to 'astonish the senses':

There is then a certain duplicity attached to the very notion of trucage. There is always something hidden inside it (since it remains trucage only to the extent to that which the spectator is taken by surprise), and at the same time, something which flaunts itself, since it is important that the powers of cinema be credited for this astonishing of the senses.

Innovation in and re-inscription of special effects, therefore, is innovation in and re-inscription of cinema's capacity to 'astonish the senses'.

A final characteristic of these films has been the use of lighting effects, from the stroboscopic finale of *The Alien*, and the 'V'ger' sequence in *Star Trek*, to the

appearance of the mother ship in *Close Encounters*, all of which occur, it should be noted, at the point of dramatic climax. As with special effects proper, though to a much more limited extent, a complex technology has been involved. For example, the 'V'ger' set in *Star Trek* needed 100,000 watts of power to be generated, and special lighting units called 'post-scanners' were built especially for *Close Encounters*. The function of this technology, of these effects, is, in a sense, to make a spectacle of light itself. Light and spectacle, of course, are fundamental to cinema and to each other. Light is basic to the operation of the camera and the projector. It is also basic to spectacle, inasmuch as spectacle is a form of visual display designed to engage the scopic drive and to afford its subjects the pleasures of looking. To make a cinematic spectacle of light, the very sign of the conjunction of these things together, is thus the most intense way possible of cementing and inscribing that conjunction, a way of reaffirming as strongly as possible the visual fundamentals of film.

In a sense this particular cycle of films is the same as any other: it renews the cinematic institution through a balance of novelty and repetition. But there seems to be another dimension here, in that all the features linking these films together touch so fundamentally upon the conventions and mechanisms characteristic of mainstream cinema. What they seem to assert, above all, is cinematic power, its basis in narrative and spectacle and its ability to astonish and convince. Perhaps in that sense the Oedipal features of these films are simultaneously crucial and symptomatic, for what they participate in re-inscribing so unequivocally is the law of the cinematic institution and the cinematic institution as an aspect of the law.



IAN PENMAN

'BAD TIMING' A CODIFYING LOVE STORY

It is not simply a question of saying what was done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it. (Foucault)*

Bad Timing's 'work-in-progress' title is said to have been *Illusions*. The implications of this originary trace overlap the final choice: where the latter specifies a moment – a crucial area of the text – within the film's narrative, the former is more obviously 'thematic', less of an explicatory advertisement. It is midway between these two 'intentional' signs that *Bad Timing* seems most appropriately

placed: a 'box office' film with an unusually open and emphatic signifying mobility – multi-layered, referential, displaced from meaning to meaning. It is a film which institutes the question of how sexuality is regulated by power and the idea that desire is a legally constituted object – a quite explicit analysis of viewing and voyeurism, of 'gaze' and guilt, within an aesthetic surround that is both a critique and a continuation of popular narrative cinema, more especially the 'traditional' heterosexual love story.

In this particular 'look' at the film, I perform a fairly quantitative transplant of a number of quotations from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* as – hopefully – a *bricoleur's* entrance into the security of presently received 'views' of *Bad Timing*. For professional criticism has, not surprisingly, tended to produce an authorised version of *Bad Timing*, treating it thoroughly as a Nicolas Roeg film to the exclusion of most other considerations –

* Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol I: An Introduction, Vintage, New York 1980, p 63.

108 and then finding it perilously 'over-ambitious', even disappointing by such criteria. The most common, and very low brow denominator seems to have been how '(un)believable' or even '(dis)agreeable' the central two, or three characters are: an oddly anti-mythical attitude for the average film critic, to say the least. The problem is not so much one of critical 'distance', as of vantage. Foucault suggests:

The 'economy' of discourses – their intrinsic technology, the necessities of their operation, the tactics they employ, the effects of power which underlie them and which they transmit – this, and not a system of representations, is what determines the essential features of what they have to say.

Before we go any further, it is perhaps necessary to clarify Foucault's use of the word 'power', which is

not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society

Bad Timing's lovers are two expatriate Americans living in contemporary Vienna, who meet by chance at a party. Dr Alex Linden (Art Garfunkel) is a research psychoanalyst, Milena Flaherty (Theresa Russell) is the occasional wife of a retired Czech Colonel, Stefan Vognic (Denholm Elliott), many years her senior and vastly tolerant of her unfaithful, unpredictable sexuality (she leaves him whenever she feels like it, has affairs). The physical and metaphorical span of the Flaherty-Linden affair is established in the film's opening triptych of scenes: the couple enjoying one another's company,

as yet unproblematic, in the appropriately 'ideal' setting of an art gallery; the gaudy sensuality of a Klimt is replaced by the warning glare of a Schiele malcontent, and we cut to a brief interior shot, Flaherty unconscious in a speeding ambulance, Linden by her side; lastly – and the narrative's most likely starting point proper – a 'classically' stylistic separation between 'Mr & Mrs' Vognic, on a rainswept bridge over the Danube which also serves as neutral ground between the Czech and Austrian borders.

The 'neutral' border area acts as a quiet and imposing metaphor. Milena's sexuality is constructed upon an opposition: on one side of the border it is legally, willingly, given over to an assimilation in marriage; on the other, she is free to do as *she* pleases. It is precisely this wilful expedience that Linden is unable – or refuses – to accept. The question of sexuality as a legally definable property, something one is able to *secure*, is repetitively encountered. When Milena is admitted to surgery, the first thing the hospital staff seek to establish is Linden's *legitimate* relationship to the patient: '*husband? relation? boyfriend?*'. He evades the question, and the hasty wisdom of a remark he had previously directed against Milena resounds: '*to be in between is to be nowhere at all*'.

Our position as viewers of the film is mostly a lacunal one, stranded between narrative and shot, denied surety of knowledge. Roeg utilises a familiar repertoire of two-way signs, split ends, equations – intensifying chosen areas, heightening certain surfaces, dramatising 'empty' moments, stratifying sound and image. The narrative isn't sewn along one clearly delineated track, but scattered over a multiplicity of indicators. These circulate around the prolonged 'absence'

of a smoothly accelerating storyline, and aesthetic cohesion is held more through a compulsive – and useful – catalogue of individual habits, characteristics and possessions than by dominance of plot. If there is any 'concealed' object, it is not to be exposed as a part of the narrative, but as an effect of its specific construction.

Although most reviews have delegated him a position of insignificance – a merely functional, almost cameo role – the character of Inspector Netusil (Harvey Keitel) contains the narrative's centrifugal force. He orbits the sexual couple – always voyeuristically other – and it is in his relationship with Linden that our clues, so to speak, are concentrated: 'The law as such doesn't interest me; what I see . . .'. Linden has already qualified Netusil's 'latent' voyeurism in a lecture – 'Secrecy and Spying, or, call it what you will, Watching' – to his students: 'We are all spies: . . . through the gratification of curiosity one acquires knowledge'. And knowledge is bound to desire, is saturated with pleasure. There exists

a whole subtle interchange from one to the other: a knowledge of pleasure, a pleasure that comes from knowing pleasure, a knowledge-pleasure.

Linden's selfish, obsessive pursuit of Milena is merely the façade of the 'chase after the truth of sex, the truth in sex'. Nor does Netusil wish for anything so rigid as a 'solved' crime. 'What is detection, if not confession?' he asks Linden rhetorically. 'Tell me what you dare not', Netusil is the encircling agency of domination, Linden the site for the unfolding discourse of 'truth' –

it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and

exhaustive expression of an individual secret. 109

Sexuality is an object of detection: it is detected, discovered, discharged, as a stain, a symptom, in the depths of the imaginary or on the surface of a sheet, across all signs of behaviour.

Sexuality is admitted within a power relationship, but that power does not rest in the individual subjects, it is not a given – a 'certain strength we are endowed with' – its existence depends on a number of different points of resistance, support, confrontation – some of which *Bad Timing* deals with. In the 'medicalisation' of Milena's sexuality, for instance, especially well emphasised in the montage of hospital image – the vaginal swab Netusil has demanded – and bedroom sound, which produces a sharp contrast between the normative representation of 'idyllic' sexual union and the pathology or problematicity intrinsic to the female body. 'Bliss' is thus expressed not as an isolated perfection, or perfect disjunction, but as an effect within the interplay of a whole range of problematic discourses. Similarly, *Bad Timing* is at pains to show that any visual relationship we enter into is always already constructed for us, informed and organised by symbolic, ideological, political, and other structures. Within its – albeit aesthetically 'seductive' – reflexivity of form, sexuality refuses to be merely an additional predicate 'of' the film, 'of' a Nicolas Roeg film. *Bad Timing's* contortion and contention of source material, of the interrelation of image and sound, narrative and shot, exceeds the boundaries predicated on or of it; the representation of experience is examined before attaining and in order to attain any kind of 'conclusion', before revealing its 'foundation'. This is the deconstruction of narrative with narrative.

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COLIN MACCABE

'SLOW MOTION'

A naked prostitute lies on the floor of a hotel room with a man straddling her, his boss sits at a desk while another prostitute stripped from the waist down stands next to a telephone. 'Can I use the 'phone before we start? – Hello, I'm calling about the advertisement for the flat in the paper. It's already gone? Sorry to bother you.' Godard's new film *Slow Motion* (*Sauve Qui Peut (la vie)*) continues his relentless investigation into the divorce between sound and image but this investigation is now, for the first time in over ten years, integrated into a narrative as the telephone conversation clashes farcically and revealingly with the scene in the hotel room. And with the return to narrative cinema, Godard also returns to what may prove to have been his most enduring theme: prostitution. Godard has always been at least one step ahead of his public image but with *Slow Motion* he accomplishes, for most of an English audience, two steps at once. Those who think about the topic at all, think of Godard as locked into a sectarian Maoist politics making didactic films which are never given a commercial release. They will thus be surprised at the lack of

politics in the plot of *Slow Motion*. A woman working in television (Nathalie Baye) wants to leave both her lover (Jacques Dutronc) and the city for a tranquil life in the countryside; he pursues a tormented life in the city, unable to make her stay, unable to take up again a relationship with his wife and daughter. One of his encounters is with a prostitute (Isabelle Huppert) and the film then follows her through a series of encounters with clients and pimps. The final section of the film rounds off the narrative with the prostitute renting Nathalie Baye's flat and Dutronc dead, run over by a car as his wife and daughter walk on the other side of the road.

In fact it is not the absence of explicit politics in Godard's film which is surprising but the relatively straightforward use of narrative. It could be argued that Godard's explicit political commitment came to an end as early as 1970. At that stage Godard had spent two frantic years filming with Jean-Pierre Gorin under the name of the Dziga-Vertov group. The work was financed by television companies on the strength of Godard's name but the results, a

112 combination of dogmatic Maoism and an extraordinary investigation of the language of film, were deemed too political or too difficult to ever reach the small screen. The culmination of these experiments was to be a film entitled *Jusqu'à La Victoire* which would celebrate and explain the victory of the Palestinian revolution in Jordan, but the editing of the film was brought to an abrupt halt by the events of Black September which ridiculed the confident analysis of the film. After this Godard and Gorin abandoned the name of the Dziga-Vertov group and explicit Maoism to make the only film with stars released by Godard in the 1970s *Tout Va Bien*. This film, which starred Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, is probably the most accurate film on the events of '68 and its aftermath produced in France. But if it was made from a political viewpoint, its emphases on the intermeshing of the personal and the political threatened to render the political element vacuous. Politics, as was perhaps endemic to Western Maoist thinking, became less a question of specific demands and projects than continuous opposition to the alienating effects of industrial society and particularly to the division of work and love effected by an ever-increasing division of labour.

It is this divorce and its relation to the circulation of the image in our society which has been the explicit object of Godard's enquiries since 1973 when, after breaking with Gorin, he set up a company, Sonimage, with Anne-Marie Miéville, first in Grenoble and then in the tiny Swiss town of Rolle. It is the work of Sonimage which constitutes the missing step for a British audience. Godard and Miéville have produced three films and eighteen hours of television programmes over the past six years but only one of these films, *Numéro Deux*, is

available in England. If there was one lesson that Godard was to keep from the Maoist period it was its emphasis on production – its collective nature and the importance of control of each and every stage of filming. Video seemed to offer both the possibility of total control and a crew small enough for collective work to be more than a fiction. Sonimage is fully equipped with video and most of their work over the last seven years has been produced on videotape with the results being transferred onto film at the final stage.

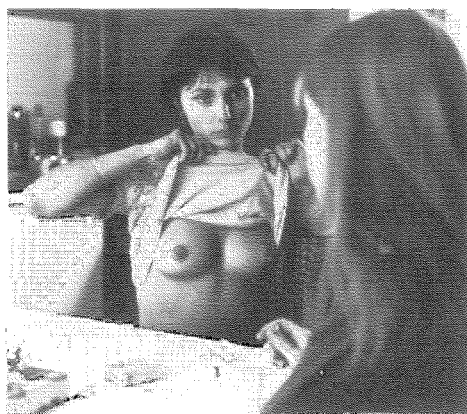
The work at Sonimage has abandoned the impersonal rhetoric of Maoism in favour of a much more directly personal approach. In particular, the interviews which Godard conducts have none of that spurious 'objectivity' which marks the television interview, rather they circulate around Godard's own obsessions and concerns; it is Godard's own interest in the answers that keeps the interview going. Perhaps Sonimage's finest work is a series of twelve half-hour television programmes completed just before *Slow Motion*. Entitled *France/Tour/Detour/Deux/Enfants*, they are remarkable both for their use of the technological resources of video and for their interrogation of the form of the documentary. Two children provide the focus for Godard's investigation. Each programme interrupts one of the children in the course of their day's activities (dressing, going to school, watching television) and these activities are investigated both visually and in the course of a series of interviews in which the children talk to Godard. Some of the terms produced in these preliminary investigations are then further analysed in the rest of the programme. There is no claim that we are being shown the reality of the child's experience, rather we learn how opaque that experience is for that

most clear of media: television. The opacity of the child's world is used to reflect on the 'clarity' of the adult experience and the ways in which that clarity is dependent on the forms of television. The programmes can thus be considered, as one reading of the title suggests, as a tour of France by the detour of two children.

Sonimage's previous work prepares one for many of the themes of *Slow Motion*. Most important of these is the opposition between town and country. When the character played by Dutronc meets his wife to pay her the monthly cheque, his daughter is struggling over an essay on the blackbird, describing how in one country after another it has changed its habitat and behaviour in order to become a city rather than a country bird. Dutronc suggests a final paragraph which claims that the history of the last two hundred years should be understood in terms of this change rather than any unimportant political changes. *Slow Motion* is an attempt to construct the terms of that understanding, providing a fictional form to grasp the opposition between town and country. Familiar, too, is the increased emphasis on the personal, the autobiographical. Dutronc's name in the movie is Paul Godard, an appellation which Godard enigmatically glosses: 'I borrowed my father's name for ninety minutes in order to be less afraid of women'. What is certain is that, in opposition to the films of the 1960s which focused on feminine sexuality, it is male sexuality which provides the neuralgic locus around which the film turns. 'Each time we touch we seem to bruise one another' says Dutronc and masculine attitudes to women are presented unequivocally in terms of a desire to hurt, abuse and, above all, control. The scenes in which the prostitute visits her clients

113
emphasise the fetishistic nature of male sexuality, constantly trying to fix female sexuality into an image which can be controlled. It is here that one can perhaps locate the central paradox of the film, for it is exactly such a fixed and fetishised image which is offered by the commercial cinema, always keeping sound and image *in synch* to leave the spectator untouched by what happens. It is against such an organisation that Godard has consciously struggled for the last fifteen years and in some ways the film signals an admission of defeat.

For if its themes are a continuation of Sonimage's work, its form is radically different. Where the other work of Godard and Miéville turns around a constant dissection of the image, a refusal of that plenitude of vision always confirmed by an acquiescent sound, *Slow Motion* reluctantly and hesitatingly accepts a certain dominance of the image. The voice of Marguerite Duras and fragments of the soundtrack of her film *Le Camion* disrupts the self-sufficiency of the image, reminds us of a feminine alternative, but the film remains within a masculine world of vision, fixing the image of woman as relentlessly as the clients order Huppert to take up her positions. This equivalence is underlined in the scene where Huppert goes to an address given her by an old





schoolfriend where she may find alternative work. She discovers a man at an editing table who offers her huge sums of money to do nothing but travel about. The address is 15 rue du Nord, Sonimage's address, and Godard would seem to regard his work and the return to commercial cinema as equivalent to prostitution.

This dissatisfaction at the centre of the film was very evident to me on the occasions that I visited Godard last year in the course of preparing a book on him.¹ If he no longer raged at the institution of cinema as he had ten years before, his calmer view was not fundamentally more optimistic. He constantly likened himself to someone living in an occupied country and if he felt it necessary to go back into the cinema in order to understand its extraordinary resilience, the continued demand for a story and an image, he still felt that the economic and aesthetic constraints in the cinema went hand in hand. On one of the days when shooting finished early on *Slow Motion*, the dis-

cussion amongst the crew turned into an extraordinary impromptu lecture by Godard in which he insisted that the financing of a film determined its aesthetic choices. Time was what one was not allowed – from the moment stars were hired and money invested, a production schedule imposed its own rhythms on the work. Equally both he and Miéville were dissatisfied with the decision, forced on them by their co-producers, to use film instead of video for the actual shooting. Once again it was a question of losing control of time, in this case because the ability to shoot and reshoot with the same video-tape allows a much greater flexibility than film.

In the middle of the film Paul Godard reads out a quotation from Marguerite Duras: 'I make films to kill time. If I had the courage to do nothing, I'd do nothing. It's because I haven't got the strength to do nothing that I make films. For no other reason. That's the most sincere thing I can say about my activities.' 'That goes for me too' says the character played by Dutronc and it would seem, now, to go for Jean-Luc Godard as well. A further paradox, however, remains. What almost any account of the plot of the film must necessarily miss is the exhilaration of actually watching the movie. As Godard kills time he brings it alive for us.

1 Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, Macmillan, London 1980
Slow Motion is distributed in the UK by Artificial Eye, 211 Camden High Street, London NW1

JANE CLARKE

'SIDE EFFECTS', 'WRESTLING'

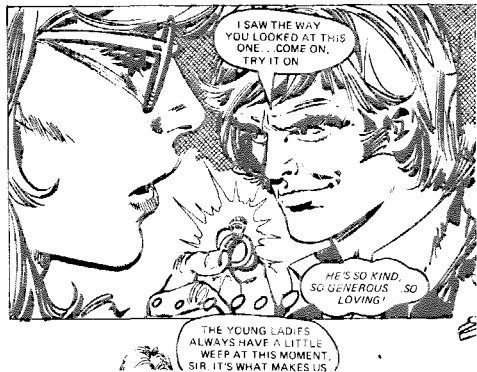
'Side Effects' 1980 Jacky Garstin/Delyse Hawkins, 40 mins.

She gets up, makes the husband breakfast, so he's happy about that, he might even dislike her but he might be happy about the breakfast being made, so it actually makes the system work.

(Dave Foley/protagonist *Side Effects*)

The role of the man in the family reinforces aggressive individualism, authoritarianism and a hierarchical view of social relations, values which are fundamental to the perpetuation of capitalism.

extract from *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* Sheila Rowbotham,
quoted in *Side Effects*



Marriage is one of the most central institutions of our culture and the focus of numerous and conflicting discourses. Marriage is variously presented as the culmination of Romantic Love (comic and magazine fiction, films, songs, etc); as the exemplary unit of consumption (many forms of advertising); as religious ceremony (the Church); as a contractual arrangement involving rights and obligations (the Law, insurance firms, etc). While each definition may well have its own internal consistency, place several of these side by side and inconsistencies will abound. For example if marriage symbolises disinterested and enduring love, why is it necessary to fix it by legal and financial contract?

Side Effects is interested in these mismatches of meaning. The film is basically an investigation into marriage as a particularly potent site of contradiction. It's made up of nine sections which work autonomously but also build up references across the whole film. These sections are primarily organised around the differences between expectation and experience of marriage – what happens when Romantic Love collides with the 'cohabitation rule' of the Department of Health and

116 Social Security. In section four a rostrum camera scans comic strip imagery taken from several teenage magazines mainly dealing in love stories. This material is filmed in extreme close-up so that the texture of the paper and the spots of ink are foregrounded and this works to emphasise the one-dimensionality of these depictions of ritual courtship. On the soundtrack a man and woman speak of their own and friends' experiences of married life. Whereas the iconography of Romantic Love always ends at the kiss or the wedding, the voices relate life after marriage. This is a fairly simple example of the work of the film. More complex relationships between sound and image, expectation and experience are given elsewhere. In section five an apparently slick piece of radio journalism about the marriage expectations of Prince Charles is heard over long held shots of the vast Doddington housing estate in Battersea. This juxtaposition sets up a whole series of unexpected connections often owing to random events on the image track. In the third section of the film the status of the image is not immediately clear. What appears to be a scene from TV drama or soap opera, an image of ideal married lifestyle, is

gradually revealed, as the camera tracks away to be a photographic studio engaged in the business of selling carrots,— attractive and prosperous couples eat this brand only. Other aspects around and about marriage are dealt with such as the relationship of work to marriage — which defines the person more? The film also looks critically at the restrictive definition the DHSS 'cohabitation rule'. Sleeping together three consecutive nights constitutes a married relationship in their book and this repressive criterion can be used to force one person's economic dependence on another. But, most importantly, the structure of *Side Effects* allows it to demonstrate the partiality of all these definitions and succeeds in analysing marriage as an institution which favours, and helps to perpetuate, dominant values.

In every section of the film the material is worked on at the level of representational practices. This formal aspects of *Side Effects* is integral to the film's project. Distancing strategies are used because this film is trying to distance the viewer from the sounds and images which surround us and construct expectations of 'love and marriage/horse and carriage' every waking day.

'Wrestling' 1979 Gabrielle Bown, London College of Printing, Greater London Arts Association, 20 mins.

It has been argued in *Screen* and elsewhere that the 'look' is one of the major organising principles of cinema.¹ Most of this work has been concerned with narrative film-making where a complex relay of 'looks' is in operation: the

camera's 'look' at the scene; 'looks' between characters within the scene; the mediation of the camera's 'look' through a particular character in a point-of-view set-up; the spectator's 'look' at the screen. In documentary film-making the system appears less complex: there is the camera's 'look' at the scene and the spectator's 'look' at the screen. This system would seem to be less mediated, guaranteeing a more direct relationship between camera and spectator position. The notion of objective coverage then begins to creep in: the camera merely

1 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* vol 16 no 3; Paul Willemen, 'Voyuerism, The Look and Dwsokin', *Afterimage* no 6, 1976.



records from a neutral space, and the next step is to accord documentary film-making a different status of truth from narrative films. It is easy to reject this argument theoretically. It is perhaps less easy to keep remembering the absurdity of the proposition that documentary film-making is nearer 'the truth' in one's everyday consumption of media events. For example 'everyone knows' the depiction of boxing in *Rocky* carries narrative signifieds, whereas a TV depiction of boxing is perhaps not seen in this way.

SPECTATOR SPORT AS A METAPHOR FOR CINEMA AND CINEMA AS A SPECTATOR SPORT

I would argue that Gabrielle Bown's *Wrestling* is as much about the 'look' in cinema and TV as it is about bodies coming into forcible contact. Two wrestling matches were filmed, the first with one camera the second with a film and video camera set-up. These are alternated with video footage of a young

boy in extreme close-up watching TV and shot in such a way that he himself resembles a televisual image. In the wrestling match sequences, Bown frequently turns her camera onto the faces of the audience. She is more interested in their act of looking at the wrestling than in the match itself. The images are striking: a roomful of women and men sitting round a ring their eyes focused on a spotlit square of light. Similarly the footage of the child requires us to look at his looking. We see his fascinated gaze at a TV screen (a small square of light), but we don't see what he's watching.

COMMENTARY THROUGH JUXTAPOSITION OF DIFFERENT IMAGE QUALITIES

Wrestling does not have a commentary in the classic sense. There is no privileged voice-over to locate and fix the meaning of the images, usually so crucial an element in mainstream documentary film-making. The soundtrack consists of:

- 1 *The announcer's voice*
- 2 *Music played during the match*
- 3 *Clapping and shouting from the audience*
- 4 *Silence (sound turned off abruptly in mid-action)*

However a meta-discourse is generated by the different image qualities which are placed side by side:

- 1 *Video footage – Some shot on low light so there are different levels of definition*
- 2 *16mm colour film*
- 3 *16mm black and white film. Some shot in low light conditions and pushed by the labs and therefore very grainy.*

- 4 *Occasionally the video or film footage is slowed down.*

The film-maker has therefore intervened to radically alter the images so that *Wrestling* doesn't provide a norm of looking, but a series of differences in visual information which the viewer has to decode for her or himself (cinema as spectator sport). The film refuses the notion of objective coverage and, by extension, demonstrates that mainstream sports coverage is one specific, albeit very stable, system of representation among many others.

Both *Side Effects* and *Wrestling* were screened as part of the 3 week festival of womens films at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in October 1980.

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